



Prologue

Where did things go wrong?

On top of a mountain of garbage that had piled up, the Guide was hugging his knees and asking himself this question.

“Liam now has the strength to defeat us. What now?”

By unleashing what he called the ‘True One-Flash’, Liam had been able to defeat Gudwar.

In other words, his attacks could now reach the Guide as well.

“Should I just leave him alone? B-But then what about my feelings? I’ve sworn to take revenge on him!”

Liam had ranked up from being someone he couldn’t touch easily to someone who could erase his existence if handled carelessly.

And this was all because of a school of swordsmanship that never existed in the first place.

“He’s the anomaly here! One-Flash my foot! To think he’d seriously believe in that hoax of a street performer, and even reproduce it. There must be something wrong with him.”

Through his own misunderstanding and diligence, Liam had given birth to a swordsmanship style that shouldn’t have existed, and his abilities were about to transcend the natural boundaries of humans.

Someone like Liam couldn’t be artificially created.

Put another way, Liam's existence was a miracle in and of itself.

“But as things stand, I'll be erased if I try to approach him.”

The Guide shivered as he recalled the manifestation of power which Liam had unconsciously created.

The light giant embodied Liam's strength, and it would force his gratitude upon the Guide after finding him.

Liam's daily gratitude toward the Guide had led to its creation, and though he wasn't aware of it, the giant would shove his gratitude toward the Guide whenever it could.

Liam had gained power beyond human comprehension, and he wasn't someone the Guide could easily approach anymore.

If he tried to do so, he would be forced to accept Liam's gratitude, which would erase him in the process.

“—In that case, I'll have him die in the real world. Yes, that sounds more feasible.”

[TN: No idea why he's suddenly bringing up the topic of “real world”. The raw says 亂殺リ Liam in the real world”, which, translated literally, would be “I'll erase Liam in the real world”. I can only figure that he can't kill the golden samurai, but if he killed Liam's physical body it might kill the giant.]

Since he couldn't do it himself, he'll have another human perform the deed.

Fortunately for him, Liam had many enemies.

The most the Guide could do at the moment was to support Liam's enemies in defeating him.

“But— this strategy has failed numerous times in the past.”

The Guide was beginning to lose faith in himself as everyone he supported had eventually met their end.

He slowly raised his heavy body and looked up at the sky.

The Capital was surrounded by various metals, but there was a starry night reflected in his eyes.

At first glance, the night sky appeared extremely beautiful, but it was nothing more than a projection.

From outer space, the Capital would look like a planet covered in metal.

“Such stuffy air. The Empire’s Capital is truly wonderful. The wounds I received from Liam are being healed just by being here.”

Being a connoisseur of negative emotions, the Guide was very much pleased with all the feelings of malice and desire that had accumulated over thousands of years.

The metal shell was there to protect the Capital, but it was also what led to such stale air, making it an excellent location for the Guide to heal from his injuries.

“Well then, shall we take a look at the situation? Calvin seemed to be the most promising candidate.”

Calvin was the Crown Prince of the Algrand Empire. He was someone who stood in the way of Cleo, the third prince, and the one Liam was supporting.

Truth be told, Cleo held no real power. The fierce battle was between Calvin and Liam, Cleo’s backer.

At the present time, Calvin was the only person who could compete against Liam, who had become one of the most powerful people in the Empire.

However, there were problems with Calvin as well.

“At the end of the day, Calvin is inferior when placed next to Liam. Can he win with my support? In fact, even if I were to take into account my support, will he even be able to put up a fight?”

The Guide had helped out Liam's opponents many times in the past, yet they were defeated time and time again, to the point where the Guide began asking himself whether his help was doing any good.

Having said that, if he stood by and did nothing, Liam's victory would be all but assured.

“Let's first observe what's going on.”

The Guide decided to investigate the inner workings of the Capital.

As he had been away from the Empire for a while, he wasn't as familiar with what was happening as he was before.

He was curious about how Calvin was doing, and so with a heavy heart, he began his investigation.

◇

The building containing Calvin's living quarter was located in the Inner Palace, and had the appearance of a castle.

Though it was called the Inner Palace, the place was extremely huge, and a lot of skyscrapers had been built there, making it almost like a big city.

Kukuri's subordinates were on the floor, collapsed inside the castle's great hall.

While vomiting blood, one of Kukuri's subordinates looked up at Cleo, who stood before them.

“You've betrayed Lord Liam!”

Cleo had short red hair, with only the right side of his bangs being longer than the rest, giving it an unbalanced feeling.

Though he was dressed as a man, he could easily be mistaken as a woman due to his androgynous appearance.

Cleo stared down at Kukuri's subordinates, who had protected him until then, with cold eyes.

"I'm grateful to the Count. I'm only alive right now thanks to Banfield. However—I no longer need him."

"Even if it's you—!"

Kukuri's subordinate tried to detonate the bomb embedded in his body, but before he could, dozens of blades whizzed past the air and pierced him, stopping the explosion and killing him.

They were in Calvin's castle, and hundreds of his Dark Ops personnel were surrounding Cleo.

Surrounded by many knights, Calvin could be seen descending the staircase leading to the great hall.

He stopped in the middle of the stairs and looked at Cleo with suspicion in his eyes.

"I didn't think you'd go this far. Count Banfield won't stay silent to such betrayal."

Kukuri's subordinates were competent, but few in number. As they couldn't be replenished, they were very valuable.

Liam had dispatched three of them to serve as Cleo's escorts as a sign of acknowledgment toward him.

"I'm prepared for that. He and I aren't compatible with one another."

(There's no turning back now. Liam—it turns out I don't have what it takes to accept you.)

Cleo's eyes had turned pitch black, with no trace of light anywhere.

He regarded Liam, who commanded greater authority than him, as an eyesore.

He could remain safe as long as he had Liam's support, but he could no longer stand being seen as nothing more than an accessory.

Calvin, however, was doubtful of Cleo's words.

"You're throwing away your stable position just for that? What is it that you're trying to achieve? If you had just stayed quiet, you would've had the title of Crown Prince handed to you, and you could've taken over the throne. If you want to drive Count Banfield out, you could've done so after becoming the Emperor."

If he wanted to become a dictator by cutting off the supporters who backed him, he should have waited until he took the throne.

Cleo's behavior made no sense to Calvin, and Cleo was aware of this as well.

"Forget about becoming the Emperor. I just can't stand being treated as a tool that's under his control."

—He could no longer bear being treated as an extra who's beside Liam.

"As a man, I wish to leave a mark in this world. I decided it would be better to get rid of Banfield than to accept being regarded as his sidekick."

Calvin looked at Cleo with squinted eyes, still suspecting the nature of his betrayal.

"In the past, there was someone in the Empire who killed his allies to prove that he'd switched sides, but it was later revealed that the killing of his allies was also a part of the plan to deceive his enemies. I won't trust you just because you've handed over your guards."

Faced with Calvin's suspicion, Cleo simply shrugged.

"It seems Elder Brother is a person of low caliber."

The Black Ops personnel and the knights drew their weapons at his words, but Calvin held them back by raising his hand.

“Step back! —Cleo, do you really understand? Betrayal is a heavier act than you think. All the more so considering who you’re betraying.”

Are you seriously going to betray Liam, the Count Banfield?

Cleo responded to his question with a faint smile.

“Once Elder Brother becomes Emperor, I will support you from the side. Rather than relying on Banfield, together, we can make the Empire prosper.”

His desire to defeat Liam overshadowed his desire to reach the throne.

Calvin’s expression was bitter.

Cleo whispered.

“Elder Brother—you’re at your wit’s end, aren’t you?”

Indeed, from the beginning, Calvin had no choice, but to accept his hand.

Calvin had suffered continuous defeat under Liam, and he had been backed into a corner.

“—Fine.”

Cleo knelt when he heard Calvin’s decision.

“From today, I’ll act as Elder Brother’s arms and legs.”

◇

Humans were such beautiful creatures.

Or so the Guide thought as he watched over the two from behind one of the pillars.

He was even somewhat moved.

Recently, he had to deal with weirdos that forced their gratitude upon him for no reason, but humans were never rational creatures to begin with.

All he had to do was wait for time to pass. Even when everything was going well, something would make them feel dissatisfied, prompting them to plot against each other.

Cleo, who was trapped in his negative thoughts, appeared dazzling to the Guide.

“There’s still hope for humans after all. The enemy of mankind is no doubt mankind itself.”

The Guide gave a heartfelt nod toward Cleo’s twisted emotions and gestured like he was wiping away tears.

“—Cleo and Calvin. If they join hands, it’ll surely place Liam in jeopardy. He may be strong, but Liam was still human, barely. Alone, he stands no chance.”

Calvin, Liam’s enemy inside the Empire, and Cleo, who was supposed to be his ally, had joined hands for the sake of subjugating him.

The Guide was delighted over how things were looking for Liam, even without his intervention.

“It seems I’ve been underestimating the humans. Fret not, for I’ll give you two my full support.”

With the Guide watching over them with a smile, Calvin immediately gave Cleo a test.

“Beating Count Banfield, who’s known as the Empire’s strongest swordsman, is easier said than done. Cleo—what are your thoughts?”

Calvin and his subordinates had failed many a time trying to beat him.

He was simply asking Cleo for his thoughts, but it also doubled as a test.

A test to see whether Cleo was truly on his side. A test to see how useful he would be.

Cleo stood up before he addressed Calvin.

“Why, it’s just a matter of pitting the strongest swordsman against the strongest swordsman.”

“You’re not wrong, but among the Empire’s four Sword Saints, three have already fallen victim to the blades of One-Flash, and the last one can’t leave the border unattended. Who can we pit him against?”

It was an obvious answer, but when told that the chance of success was low, Cleo giggled with his fist over his mouth.

With an ominous atmosphere surrounding him, he revealed his plan.

“Let’s mass-produce the Banfield Family’s strongest mobile knight—Avid.”

“That ‘thing’ is a lump of rare metals, enough to prepare several fleets.”

“But they’ll be worth the price.”

“Even so, we won’t have anyone to pilot them.”

“Then all we have to do is prepare them.”

Calvin shook his head.

In response, Cleo, who had been planning this for a long time, projected an image in the air.

“They’ll be equipped with artificial intelligence that has analyzed Liam’s maneuvering data. For the pilots, we can make clones of Liam.”

“W-What?! Have you gone insane?! Those are both taboos!!!”

Artificial intelligence, that which almost drove mankind to destruction.

Human cloning, a forbidden technology.

Leaving the production of Avid aside, Calvin felt reluctant about the use of the two technologies.

Seeing him hesitate, Cleo spoke to him as if to mislead him.

“What matters is that we achieve victory. It just goes to show that Banfield is that strong of an opponent.”

Calvin was still troubled over what to do and asked Cleo how much of the plan was already in motion.

“How far has the plan progressed?”

“We’ve already started developing the artificial intelligence. Unfortunately, we’ve yet to acquire Banfield’s genes. Worse comes to worst, we’ll collect the DNA of Liam’s parents and prepare someone that exceeds Liam in capacity. What I want from Elder Brother is to manufacture Avid—no, I want you to prepare a mobile knight which surpasses Avid.”

Calvin still had his doubts, but he didn’t know what the future held for him if he lost to Liam.

He would be lucky to be granted a quick death.

Fearing for his future, he promised to prepare a mobile suit that surpassed Avid as he wouldn’t have to directly be involved with breaching the taboo.

“Alright. I’ll prepare the mobile knight, but will Count Banfield appear on the battlefield?”

“If he doesn’t come out, we can just have the mobile knight raise hell and cripple the Banfield Family’s military. A suit that can move beyond human limits will surely be capable of destroying the Banfield Family.”

Cold sweat ran down Calvin’s back as he watched Cleo laugh.

The Guide was impressed by the lengths Cleo was willing to go, even dabbling with taboos.

At the same time, however, he realized a critical flaw in the plan.

“Wait a minute. He doesn’t have Liam’s gene, arguably one of the most important components to this plan? Also, Liam’s mobile suit has a machine heart, does it not?”

The Guide was worried.

At this rate, Cleo and Calvin would lose.

To increase the chance of winning as much as possible, Liam’s DNA would be necessary.

“I-I guess I’ll have to step in.”

While the Guide was thinking of how to help them, Cleo passed an order to one of Calvin’s subordinates.

“You over there. Shoot me.”

“Eh? Pardon?”

Although his subordinate was confused by Cleo’s order, Calvin realized his intentions and reluctantly agreed.

“You’re putting yourself in harm’s way just to deceive him— You’re willing to go that far?”

Upon being asked, Cleo smiled.

“Don’t you think my resolve is praiseworthy? Besides, he’ll suspect me if I’m unharmed. Even if I’m injured, he’ll probably be suspicious of what happened. It’ll all be worth it if it weighs on your conscience even just a little bit.”

Cleo was ready to get injured to deceive Liam.

There was a chance of him actually getting killed here, but he wasn't afraid.

Seeing his resolve and determination, Calvin made a sarcastic remark.

“As expected of a prince of the blood-stained Empire.”

“I’m honored.”

Calvin’s subordinate raised his pistol, aimed it at Cleo, and pulled the trigger.

Thieves

“How dare you run your mouth in front of Master! Take this, and this~”

“That hurts! For real, stop!”

I, [Liam Sera Banfield], have called a girl into my office.

With clenched fists, I’ve put [Ciel Sera Exner] in a headlock, and I’m knuckling her head.

It’s punishment for her crime of informing Master Yasushi, the esteemed Sword God, that I’m reluctant to marry Rosetta.

I’ve been avoiding the matter of my marriage with [Rosetta Sera Claudia], my fiancée, but I lost all paths of escape with Ciel tattling on me to Master.

In other words, she made use of Master to drive me into a corner.

“Huu.... Huu... You really had me sweating this time. To think someone like you could outsmart me like this.”

Ciel, who’s been released, holds her head with her hands and glares at me with teary eyes.

“I didn’t think things would end up this way either!”

She didn’t think it’d end up this way? Did she really think I wouldn’t marry Rosetta?

If so, she couldn’t have been more wrong.

“Hmph! From the beginning, my motivation for marrying Rosetta has been for her title. Even without Master’s intervention, I would’ve married her in a decade’s err... in a century’s time.”

We’re considered full-fledged the moment our aristocrat training is over.

Here, when I say full-fledged, I mean it in a societal sense, not in terms of our age. The people around me have been urging me to get married and have Rosetta give birth to a child.

As comical as it may sound in this day and age, where people can live in outer space, our society still values familial ties.

That’s just how it is in this world.

I’m a winner in this world, and I plan on taking full advantage of my position to live a fun and fulfilling life.

In my second life, I vowed to live freely without being bound by anyone.

Marrying Rosetta is an important step in gaining that freedom.

By obtaining the title of Duke from Rosetta, I’ll be able to become one of the greatest aristocrats in the Empire, both in name and reality.

—I was thinking of quickly getting married, but Rosetta succumbed to me before we could, ruining my plan of forcefully marrying her while she still hated me.

While holding her head in her hands, Ciel stares at me with unwavering determination.

“I won’t let you do as you please.”

Unlike Rosetta who was quick to fall, Ciel continues to resist me to this day.

I’ll overlook her behavior this time out of respect for that attitude of hers.

Although she took advantage of Master, an act which is unforgivable in my books, she's still someone that's been entrusted to me.

As the cherished daughter of an aristocrat, who has close ties with me, I can't punish her haphazardly.

Besides, this amount of resistance is what makes her interesting.

It's not like I suffered irreparable damage either.

At the end of the day, she's only capable of this level of mischief.

“But do you have what it takes to stop me?”

“I'll open up everyone's eyes, and prove to the world that you're a villain!”

“I'm looking forward to that. I truly hope your words reach their ears.”

“D-Don't make fun of me! I'll definitely peel off that facade of yours!”

This! This is what I'm talking about! A confrontation between evil and justice!

Having said that, people would tend to believe my words over hers, as my credibility is above that of Ciel's.

Hence, despite knowing the truth of my character, she can't outmaneuver me.

—As for what happened this time, let's just call it a freak accident that occurred because of Master's involvement.

“No matter how much you try to resist... Hmm?”

My attention shifts from Ciel to the window of the office.

I can see black smoke rising in the distance. The ground shakes a bit as well.

Did an explosion occur?

“An accident? No, it’s something else.”

“Huh? What’s wrong?”

Ciel doesn’t seem to understand what’s happening.

This just goes to show that she won’t be a threat to me.

My gaze falls on the floor, and I decide to address my guard.

“What happened?”

Seeing me talk to the floor, Ciel looks at me as if I’ve gone crazy.

‘Who are you talking to?’ her eyes seem to say.

However, a black shadow appears on the floor the next moment, and a figure emerges from within.

[Kunai], one of Kukuri’s mask-wearing subordinates, makes her appearance.

“Thieves have intruded, but we’ve secured the surrounding area.”

“—Intruders?”

My eyes narrow as I stare at Kunai, who’s on her knees with her head hanging low.

Kukuri and his subordinates are small in number, but competent nevertheless.

That said, a failure is a failure.

“Where’s Kukuri?”

“The leader has taken command of the scene.”

“Call him over when he’s done. To think he’d allow thieves into my mansion.”

Frustrated, a bit of my killing intent leaks out unknowingly, and Ciel starts to shake.

Noticing this, I retract my killing intent in a hurry.

I worry for a second that she would stop resisting me out of fear, but she puts up a brave front and acts as if nothing’s happened.

Good girl. That’s why you’re the best!

“Kunai, the thieves have been dealt with, correct?”

I turn my gaze back to Kunai, expecting a prompt reply, but she pauses before opening her mouth.

Sensing bad news, I get even more annoyed than before.

“We beg your forgiveness. —They’ve all escaped. We’re currently working with the military to locate, and block the escape routes that the thieves are presumed to have used.”

“Were they that skilled?”

I put up my guard after hearing that the intruders were skilled enough to outsmart Kukuri and his men, but Kunai gives an unexpected reply.

“W-We weren’t able to confirm that either.”

“You weren’t able to confirm their skills? What were the thieves after? Amagi and Rose—were they targeting someone? Or were they after our treasure?”

For a split second, I become worried for Rosetta’s safety, but I swallow my words.

“Fortunately, no one was harmed. However,... the thieves stole Lord Liam’s genes.”

“—Come again?”

I’m relieved to hear that no one got injured, but I’m left speechless after learning that the thieves were after my genetics.

Despite outsmarting Kukuri and his men, they went after my genes instead of aiming for my life and treasures?

Is this some kind of a silent threat?

◇

The Empire’s undercover special duty fleet was hovering near the home planet of the Banfield Family.

Inside the hangar, several people, including members of the special forces and handpicked Black Ops personnel, were gathered.

The person in command was holding a container that looked like a test tube that held Liam’s genes.

“It was easier than expected.”

Most of the people around him appeared relieved, but some of them seemed unsettled and overwhelmed by the unexpected result.

“We didn’t come across anyone from the Shadow Clan.”

“I heard there’s not that many of them, but it was still somewhat anti-climactic.”

“They’re just bloodthirsty beasts of the past, incapable of anything besides assassination.”

They had been extremely wary of the Banfield Family’s Black Ops, which was under Kukuri’s command, but they didn’t encounter any of its

members, which lowered their evaluation of the group.

After all, they had failed to protect the mansion where their master resided.

However, there was a reason why they were able to clear their mission safely.

“W-Who do you think it was that helped you along the way? If you guys had been better, I wouldn’t have received this much damage.”

The Guide laid flat on the floor, having reverted back to his hat-only state.

From how tattered and scorched he was, it was clear that he went through a lot trying to protect them.

He had to sacrifice the body that he had recovered for ‘Operation Liam’s Gene Retrieval’.

It was all thanks to the Guide guiding them that the team was able to get past Kukuri, and his men, without getting detected. It was also thanks to him that they were able to retreat with Liam’s genetics.

The Guide shed tears in his hat-only state.

“If it wasn’t for me, you guys would have been wiped out several times!”

He had once again returned to being a hat after helping them.

The Guide wiped his tears and looked over at Liam’s genes.

“But it was all worth it. Liam—your worst enemy will be yourself!”

◇

‘You’ve blundered, Kukuri.’

We’re holding a meeting inside a specially prepared dome-shaped room. Tia, who’s at the Empire’s border, is participating virtually with video and audio on.

Tia, who's being projected on a huge screen, turns her cold gaze on Kukuri, as the latter asks for forgiveness from me.

The others have similar reactions.

Marie has her arms crossed in annoyance, and it seems as if she's putting up with the urge to slash forward with her sword.

“How useless. Not only did you allow the thieves entry, you allowed them to escape. And yet you still call yourself a member of the Black Ops?”

Despite being under heavy fire from the two, Kukuri doesn't say anything back and simply focuses on apologizing to me.

“Please allow us to apologize for this blunder by taking the lives of myself, and all my subordinates involved. However, our clan's allegiance is still to the Banfield Family, so please give them another opportunity.”

I snort in response to Kukuri saying that they'll take responsibility with their lives.

Klaus, who's beside me, steps forward to defend Kukuri and his men.

“Lord Liam, the Banfield Family doesn't have anyone that can take their place. If you punish them too heavily, it may hinder our future activities.”

Until now, I've placed my trust in Kukuri and his men, giving them tasks and leaving everything up to them. It seems that has come back to bite me.

There's some reason to what Klaus is saying, so I decide to overlook Kukuri's mistakes.

“Out of consideration for all your services, I'll spare you and your men this time. —Search for the thieves, and make sure to get rid of them.”

“Acknowledged!”

Both Tia and Marie appear to have something they wish to say about my decision.

—If I’m the sort to kill Kukuri over matters like this, you two would’ve been executed ages ago.

Klaus, realizing that the air around us has changed, moves on to the next topic.

“Lord Liam, next up on the list—”

“—Is it about His Highness Cleo being attacked?”

“Yes. His Highness Cleo was attacked by an unknown party, and all the guards that we dispatched were killed. Not only are the knights and soldiers dead, but so are Kukuri-dono’s three subordinates.”

“In other words, they were annihilated,” I mutter out loud.

Everyone’s eyes land on Kukuri.

Despite pretending to be calm, I’m sure he’s boiling up inside.

‘What a disgrace. What do you have to say to this?’ Tia asks.

Kukuri remains silent, making the atmosphere stiff and cold.

Klaus, who does his job matter-of-factly, is the only one present who hasn’t made a fool of themselves, and he speaks on Kukuri’s behalf.

“All the knights and soldiers were killed as well, meaning the culprits are quite skillful. Kukuri-dono isn’t the only one to blame for this.”

It’s as he says.

We can’t let this continue forever. I’ll have to resolve the problem at hand.

“Klaus, send a new batch of escorts to protect His Highness Cleo.”

“That’s where the problem lies. His Highness Cleo has refused the Banfield Family’s escorts.”

“What?”

“Apparently, it’s because he feels responsible for causing casualties on our side, but it’s probably because he doesn’t trust us anymore. I heard he prepared his own guards.”

We had been entrusted with guarding him, yet we failed and he was injured.

Indeed, we are at fault in this situation.

Marie frowns.

“He doesn’t trust us anymore? Does he have any idea how much manpower, resources, and capital we poured into him? Without Lord Liam’s support, that runt wouldn’t have been able to rise to where he is now, and yet he acts like that!”

Tia doesn’t bother hiding her dissatisfaction either.

Only, she’s cooler about it than Marie.

‘The knights and soldiers sent to His Highness were our elites. The enemies must have been quite powerful. Lord Liam, shouldn’t we send someone from here to the Capital?’

Those present in this meeting are our core members.

Leaving aside their personalities, Tia and Marie are competent in their jobs, and despite his failure this time, Kukuri has proven himself time and time again.

Then there’s Klaus, who’s the most reliable of them all.

“Sending Klaus over would be ideal, but... Tia’s not in a position where she can move, and I’ve entrusted Marie with protecting our planet. Kukuri, it seems you’re the only one available.”

I flash a grin at Kukuri.

Understanding my underlying intentions, he stands up.

“Please allow us to redeem ourselves.”

“—Good. This is your last chance.”

“Understood!”

“Klaus, provide Kukuri with the necessary manpower. I’ll leave everything up to you.”

I’ve decided to dispatch Kukuri to the Capital, but it’s not like I’m only sending over members of the Black Ops.

The knights and soldiers have to be replenished as well, so I leave the selection of personnel to Klaus.

“As you will,” Klaus replies calmly.

‘This is what I’m talking about!’

Even if they’re beautiful, knights with problematic personalities are no good.

Tia, Marie, I’m talking about you two.

Kukuri approaches Klaus.

“Klaus-dono, there’s something I wish for you to prepare for me. Would you mind stepping outside?”

Klaus looks over at me.

Seeing me nod, he leaves the room with Kukuri.

◇

Klaus and Kukuri left the room together, but Klaus was secretly freaking out inside.

(Why am I walking side-by-side next to a Black Ops personnel? They're scary!)

For some reason, Liam placed a lot of trust in him and entrusted him with various tasks.

However, he himself was clueless as to why he was being treated as an executive, not to mention the Head Knight of the Banfield Family.

While Klaus was busy trying to hide his fear by remaining expressionless, Kukuri called out to him. As he was rather tall, he spoke to Klaus while looking down diagonally from above.

“Klaus-dono, I’ll consider this a debt to be repaid.”

“A debt?”

“Yes. Our lives were spared thanks to Klaus-dono putting in a good word for us. This isn’t in exchange for anything, but if you’d like to have someone eliminated, please let us know. Be it Christina or Marie, we’re willing to erase any obstacles for you.” Kukuri said with a cackle.

(Does he have a grudge against those two? No, rather than that, there shouldn’t be any infighting between us!)

“—I don’t need anyone assassinated, thank you. Please just help me out if I land myself in trouble.”

“Those two are eyeing your position. The moment they see an opportunity, they’ll no doubt come for Klaus-dono’s life.”

(I can certainly see them coming after my life to snatch my position as the Head Knight. I’m more than willing to exchange places with them, but I doubt Lord Liam would approve—)

Despite being told by Kukuri that Tia and Marie were after his life, Klaus didn’t harbor any thoughts of killing them.

He knew that it would spell trouble for the Banfield Family if either of them went missing in the current situation.

Though Klaus valued his own life, Liam had shown him kindness, so he didn't wish to pull on the latter's legs.

At the same time, he didn't wish to get involved in the fierce war between the different factions.

“No need. Getting rid of them would prove detrimental to the Banfield Family. In exchange, can I ask that I be protected from those two?”

“—That shall be arranged.”

By stepping in to protect them, Klaus had formed a connection with the Black Ops.

Proxy War

When it comes to a Count's wedding, it takes a lot of time to prepare.

Saying '*Imma get married next month*' won't cut it. It normally takes several years to prepare and notify participants.

There's nothing wrong with ignoring such custom and going ahead with the wedding ceremony, but aristocrats have needlessly high pride, and some of them would get angry, saying things like '*Why didn't you invite me!*'

What's more, if the ceremony proves to be dull, people will look down on you, and spread rumors about your family being poor.

Overall, wedding ceremonies are much more troublesome here than in my previous life.

"So many people have voiced their wish to attend the wedding after it was announced that Lord Liam would be marrying Lady Rosetta. This Brian can't help, but cry tears of joy. The current Banfield Family is even more prosperous than back when Lord Alister was in charge."

Up until a hundred years ago, the Banfield Family was regarded as a poor Count household in the countryside.

After I was born, the family underwent massive development and became one of the greatest aristocratic households in the Empire.

"It was easier than I thought it'd be."

"That's only the case for Lord Liam. Normally, even if a Count followed exactly the same path, they wouldn't get the same result."

There's a reason behind my success, one which my butler, Brian, is oblivious of.

“I was blessed with luck.”

“Luck alone wouldn't have cut it.”

—It's all thanks to the Guide, and his protection.

He's a nice guy who's helped me out countless times after I was reincarnated into this world.

He hasn't been talking to me recently, but I've seen him several times, so he's definitely helping me.

“Even so, there seems to be quite a number of people who want to attend the wedding.”

“Some of them simply wish to use this chance to get involved with the Banfield Family. Unfortunately, there are many people trying to form a connection with us, hoping to have a sip or two of the nectar of success.”

Brian, who has his hands on the information of all prospective invitees, sets his eyes on one of the aforementioned families that wish to shamelessly connect with us.

Just like me, they're aristocrats in the countryside, but they have a huge debt.

They probably want help from me as the debt is too big for them to repay.

“How brazen.”

“That is proof that the Banfield Family has become a household that others could depend on.”

“It's just small change, so it would be pretty interesting to hand him the money, and have him become one of my lackeys.”

“Does Lord Liam intend to invite everyone without filtering through the list?”

I’m not interested in serious or kindhearted individuals. After all, I’m a villain.

If I have to, I would join hands with other villains like myself.

“I’ll have him at my beck and call.”

“No, but—”

Brian appears to be against inviting such people, and desperately tries to persuade me otherwise.

Just when I’m about to change my mind thinking it’s too bothersome, an emergency call comes in.

“Who is it? —Amagi?!”

I take the call in a hurry after seeing that it’s Amagi who sent the emergency transmission.

An image gets projected in front of me, revealing the figure of Amagi from her bust-up.

‘Master, apologies for calling, but it’s an urgent matter.’

“You can call me whenever you want. So, what’s the matter?”

Normally, Amagi would visit me herself to make a report.

Something must be up since she’s made a call.

‘There have been movements in the Capital.’

“—Is this related to His Highness Cleo?”

Becoming serious, I narrow my eyes, and Brian straightens his back in attention.

‘Yes. A Baron under His Highness Cleo has filed a petition. A dispute between the Baron and a Viscount over a planet has developed into a war.’

“That’s quite normal.”

It isn’t unusual for aristocrats to fight over a planet.

Whenever veins of rare metals or relics of archaeologic importance are found, aristocrats would fight over them.

Whatever the reason is, conflicts within the Empire are daily occurrences, so there’s nothing strange with Cleo receiving a petition.

‘It certainly is. However, the Viscount who’s turned hostile against the Baron has sought out the Crown Prince for assistance, and the Calvin Faction has announced that it would provide the Viscount its full support.’

“What?”

Amagi sends me the data containing all the necessary information, and I display it around me.

I read through the report, finding some suspicious points.

“It’s cool and all those rare metals were found, but it’s strange that Calvin would personally intervene and make a big deal over something like this.”

How should I put it... it’s like the central government becoming serious over a dispute between towns and villages.

From the country’s perspective, there’s no need for the government to make a move.

At best, it might serve as a mediator between the parties involved.

And yet Calvin’s dispatching an actual army.

“—And how did His Highness Cleo respond?”

‘Back in the Capital, he promised the Baron that he would spare no effort to assist him. Furthermore, he announced that he would dispatch an army with Master as the Commander.’

“He should’ve just minded his own business.”

Brian appears upset with how things are progressing, but he doesn’t interrupt the conversation between us.

I decide to take immediate action.

“To think His Highness Cleo would make such an arbitrary decision... Amagi, call Klaus right away.”

‘Understood.’

The communication is cut off.

Brian, who’s been silent, shows a bitter face.

“What is His Highness thinking? Waging a war without permission, knowing full well that it’s an important time for us? This problem could have been solved through a discussion. What’s more, he made Lord Liam the Commander.”

Cleo is fully aware of the fact that Rosetta and I are about to get married.

The Third Prince and the Crown Prince have respectively declared to seriously support the Baron and the Viscount in their dispute.

In other words, this is a proxy war between Cleo and Calvin.

The conflict between the Baron and the Viscount is nothing more than an excuse.

They must be planning on settling the score over the battle for succession once and for all through this war.

Did His Highness Cleo grow impatient, or did Calvin become desperate? Either way, it seems both sides are looking for a reason to fight.

“—Now then, whatever shall I do?”

When there’s a fight between big factions, one could expect it to last a long time.

It might last for decades, and the result might be inconclusive.

But in a sense, it’s a convenient development to hold off the marriage.

◇

A female executive of the Henfrey Chamber of Commerce had arrived at Liam’s mansion. She was in the dressing room, smiling and explaining to Rosetta, who was looking at the mirror while wearing a pure white dress.

“How is it? This dress was made with mithril threads. A skilled tailor made it, so it’s both light and durable. Mithril is said to ward off evil, meaning it’s also a lucky charm. The price is on the higher end, but I believe this dress is perfect for someone like Lady Rosetta.”

The dress was ridiculously expensive, almost enough to buy a mobile knight.

Rosetta’s head was about to explode.

“H-How dazzling. It’s actually giving off a faint shine.”

Rosetta’s eyes hurt a little because of the faint glow of the dress.

The embroidery on it was all done using Liam’s favorite kind of thread, gold.

And there were many such dresses present.

Expensive dresses were lined up in the fitting room, and Rosetta was checking them out one after another, with Marie standing watch.

“Hmm, I guess this works as a spare. Is there anything better than this?”

The female executive became flustered when she heard Marie’s question.

“W-We don’t have anything of higher quality. This was tailor-made for this occasion.”

“You never know what kind of problems may occur on the day of the wedding. At least have a second one prepared. Also, since the bride has to change dresses several times in the course of the wedding reception, having a few more designs would be nice.”

“M-More dresses of this caliber?! Normally, wouldn’t they prepare dresses that they like, even if they’re of slightly lower quality?”

“Silence! Lord Liam has assigned that much budget. All you have to do is prepare dresses that fit Lady Rosetta’s tastes.”

“Y-Yes!”

Though Marie said all this, Rosetta was at her limit.

Surrounded by overpriced dresses, her thoughts were in disarray.

“Marie, I don’t think we need to go that far. I’m only going to wear it at the wedding, so I’d prefer a cute dress, even if it’s of the lowest quality.”

(I-I don’t think it makes sense to pay so much when I’m only going to be wearing it once.)

Marie heard what she said and turned her upper body, showing Rosetta a smile.

Rosetta gave a sigh of relief, thinking Marie understood her message.

However, when Marie turned back to face the female executive again, she glared.

“Please prepare cute dresses of the highest quality. We’ll send you the necessary materials at a later date, so have at least 300 designs ready.”

A huge sum of money would move if a first-class designer were to design hundreds of dresses.

Rosetta tried to stop Marie.

“Marie, it’s okay. I like this dress, so let’s give it a rest.”

“I will not accept compromises! Lady Rosetta, this is a once-in-a-lifetime event where you will be under the spotlight!”

Rosetta flinched seeing how firm Marie was with her decision.

That was when Marie received an urgent message.

“Who is it? It’s such an important time for—L-Lord Liam?!”

Marie immediately read the message that arrived on her terminal, and her tension visibly dropped, after which she became depressed.

Worried, Rosetta called out to her.

“What’s wrong, Marie?”

“Lady Rosetta, the wedding might have to be canceled.”

“Eh?”

“There have been movements in the Capital. His Highness Cleo and His Highness Calvin are preparing for a proxy war.”

“I-I see.”

Rosetta knew what Marie was trying to say.

(Darling would have to participate, wouldn’t he? And since it’s a big war, it’ll probably be drawn out, and he wouldn’t be able to come back in time

for the wedding.)

For a moment, Rosetta fell silent, and the maids around her couldn't think of anything to comfort her.

However, Rosetta soon raised her face up again.

“Then it can’t be helped. Darling called for you, right? You should go.”

“—Will that be alright?”

Marie asked if Rosetta wanted to protest this, but the latter shook her head.

“Since Darling has made his decision, I’ll abide by it. What’s more, it’s a critical time, right?”

“I’ll be sure to tell Lord Liam what Lady Rosetta said just now.”

After Marie left the room, Rosetta revealed a sad smile.

“So, the wedding’s going to be delayed again.”

◇

The Seventh Weapons Factory shared close ties with the Banfields, and had a number of mass-produced replicas of Avid that Liam had ordered to be prepared for his junior sisters and disciple.

Surprisingly, the person tasked with the construction of the mass-produced models wasn’t Nias, who was close to Liam.

“Eh? You want to buy all of them? N-No, you can’t. These have been built at the request of Count Banfield. You must make an order.”

A Calvinist aristocrat was visiting the factory.

“I know that, but this is an order. I’ll have them carried out straight away.”

The mechanics that came with him went to retrieve the basic frames of the three aircraft, their spares included.

The man entrusted with their construction tried to stop them.

“Please wait! You’re troubling us! Besides, they’re not finished yet.”

“We’ll finish them ourselves. All you have to do is pass the data to us.”

“And I’m telling you that we can’t!”

If they were robbed of the mass-produced Avid models that they had built at the request of Liam, the Seventh Weapons Factory would lose its credibility.

When the man resisted, the aristocrat pulled out his pistol and fired, the laser piercing the man’s foot.

“ARGHHH!”

While the man writhed in pain, the aristocrat looked up at Avid’s basic frames and smirked as they began to be carried out in a zero-gravity environment.

“The basic frames are all made of rare metals. These alone must be of considerable value.”

The armor pieces haven’t been attached to the frames, leaving them exposed.

The mechanics also carried away the rare metals that haven’t been processed yet.

While holding his thighs, the man stared at the aristocrat in horror.

“Count Banfield will not remain silent.”

The aristocrat spread his arms out.

“Very well! We’ll be using your mobile knights precisely to defeat that Count Banfield.”

“W-What are you on about?”

The aristocrat left without saying another word, but the mechanics approached the man and showed him an electronic document.

“The Imperial Army has made a requisition for these aircraft.”

“Why would the military need them? Even if they’re mass-produced models, they’re one-off aircraft, not something that the military can operate.”

Though they were mass-produced models, they were still mobile knights with obscene construction costs.

Furthermore, other than Liam, his junior sisters and disciple were the only ones that could barely control them, so they weren’t suited for military operations.

However, the mechanics left without answering him.

Planet Charlow

At a certain location inside the palace of the Imperial Capital, aristocrats of the Cleo Faction are gathering with their trusted knights and subordinates beside them.

There are numerous aristocrats, knights, and military personnel present inside the large conference room with steps leading down to the central stage. His Highness Cleo is sitting above them on a specially prepared seat.

We can see the rotating figure of Planet Charlow's 3D holographic display at the central stage.

A man that goes by the name of [Theodore Sera Zack] was appointed as the meeting's chairman

He's a good-looking man, his short black hair shone brightly under the light, but the expression on his face can only be described as brazen.

“The one to control Planet Charlow will control the Empire! I want everyone here to understand how important this battle is.”

He isn't saying it outright, but '*You guys better understand*' is the message I'm getting from his attitude.

Theodore hails from a family of Baronets, and he's a court aristocrat without any territory.

Even without doing anything, the palace grants him an annual allowance, and though he can receive more benefits if he works, he stays unemployed all this time.

The only reason he can speak so confidently before us is because he's a part of His Highness Cleo's personal guards.

He's dressed in a specially prepared uniform with the emblem of a lieutenant general attached to it.

He's been appointed this rank as he was on special duty, much like back when I was a special staff member of the military.

Theodore gives us a description of Planet Charlow.

“Planet Charlow is a habitable planet where people can settle down without the need for prior development. However, it's the rare metals that make Planet Charlow so attractive. Reports state that we can mine up a considerable quantity.”

Based on the information present in the handout, it's certainly an attractive planet.

At the present moment, Charlow is a very beautiful planet, though this will probably change once rare metals start being dug up.

“A blue planet, much like Earth.”

I recall memories of Earth from my previous life, and Klaus, who's sitting next to me, asks me about it.

“Earth?”

“It's nothing. Anyway, what are your thoughts on this?”

Klaus studies the printout for a moment before giving a very honest answer.

“It's a great planet that's in good condition. However, if it wasn't tied to the matter of succession, it wouldn't have been a planet worth fighting over.”

—Exactly.

It's certainly great, but Planet Charlow isn't worth the effort of the entire Cleo Faction.

A man that goes by Baron [Gurin] is standing next to Theodore, and he's precisely the man that's saying that the planet is his.

Baron Gurin is a slender man with androgynous appearance. What's unique about him is his long black hair, which almost touches the floor.

He's wearing a suit, but everyone's eyes are on his long hair, and his thin eyes give off the impression of a fox.

"I am grateful to the members of the Cleo Faction. Planet Charlow is a part of the Gurin Family's territory, but Viscount [Maiat] is trying to take it away from us. I ask for everyone's help so as to ensure that justice prevails."

"Justice my ass," I mutter in a whisper.

Klaus asks for the reason behind my foul mood.

"Does Lord Liam believe Baron Gurin is in the wrong?"

"There's no such thing as justice in this world. He simply wants it because it's an attractive planet. That's all there is to it. If they didn't find any rare metals there, they wouldn't have bothered to develop it."

Until now, he only saw it as a planet where conditions are good for people to settle in, but now that he's discovered rare metals, he's trying to develop it in earnest.

The neighboring lord, Viscount Maiat, heard of this and wanted it for his own.

At least that's the story. We don't even know if this Gurin dude is speaking the truth.

From the perspective of the Empire, it doesn't matter who the planet belongs to, so long as taxes flow in.

In other words, it matters not which side wins.

The only reason it matters right now is because of our conflict with Calvin.

The surrounding lords stare at Gurin with cold eyes.

“He can’t even protect his own territory.”

“If it’s really his territory, he should’ve developed it early on.”

“Just goes to show how incompetent he is.”

Gurin retreats after hearing all the criticisms, and Theodore steps forward.

“Quiet! I would like to hear Count Banfield’s opinion.”

Hearing my name mentioned, the aristocrats that have been rambling all close their mouths.

At the end of the day, I’m the top dog in this faction.

It feels really nice to see all these villainous-looking guys awaiting my orders.

“I’m not interested in your story. We’re here to discuss how we should beat our enemy.”

Theodore and Gurin’s mood become visibly worse, but they pretend like it’s alright, then Theodore subtly tries to chide me.

“Now, now, Count Banfield. It’s certainly important that we win, but Baron Gurin is our companion. I hear that his territory has been exhausted by the war, so we should arrange for relief to be sent.”

It’s all well and good to talk about matters that may sound pleasing to the public, but that kind of conversation doesn’t fly well at a gathering of villains.

Besides, it's not like Cleo's the one that is going to prepare the relief funds —it'll be me.

Why the heck do I need to give Gurin relief?

“If you want to help him so much, do it yourself. We’re gathered here to discuss how we can defeat Calvin.”

When I tell them that I’m not going to help, Cleo, who’s been watching the meeting from the sideline, appears as a stereoscopic image.

Only his upper body is shown, but because of the size of his projection, we have to look up.

Having someone stare down at me from above feels kind of annoying.

Cleo expresses his disapproval of my decision.

‘Don’t be like that, Count Banfield. Baron Gurin is on our side, and I wish to leave matters related to him to Count Banfield.’

Cleo glances at his right arm which has been injured.

It’s as if he’s trying to say *‘I got injured because of you, so listen to me.’*

I turn my gaze to Klaus, who shakes his head as if telling me that there’s no way out of this.

I glare at Cleo, not the image of him, but his actual person, who’s inside a room up near the ceiling.

“I’ll send relief supplies as soon as I can.”

‘Thanks. Viscount Maiat seems to have hit him pretty hard, so please send a lot of relief over. It would help if you could send people over as well to help rebuild his territory.’

—He’s throwing more and more trouble my way.



When the meeting was over, Cleo summoned Theodore, who served as the head of his personal guards.

Theodore gushed out a series of complaints when he was called over.

“Your Highness, I can’t stand Banfield’s attitude anymore! He pretends like he’s the king even at meetings like this one!”

Lysithea, who was standing beside Cleo, reprimanded Theodore.

Despite being of royal descent, she was a woman who became a knight.

She had given up her inheritance to protect Cleo, who was once her sister and was now her brother.

From her point of view, what Theodore said just now was unforgivable.

“Are you forgetting the fact that we are all here thanks to Count Banfield’s support?”

Theodore understood the importance of Liam’s support, but he still didn’t back down.

“Lady Lysithea, this faction is His Highness Cleo’s faction. Isn’t it natural for aristocrats that belong to the faction to throw in their support?”

“When we were at our lowest, only Count Banfield stood forward to help us. What you’re saying is no different from biting the hand that fed you.”

Theodore closed his mouth grudgingly, only to have Cleo open his.

“Leave it at that, Sister. —Theodore, I’ll have you participate in the war as a military supervisor.”

“—Understood.”

Theodore, who had been dissatisfied until now, accepted his order obediently. He even seemed happy about it for some reason.

Lysithea found that a bit worrying.

“Cleo, I would’ve understood if it was to increase our battle potential, but what’s up with this supervisor nonsense? If you don’t participate in the war and just watch from the side, you’ll garner criticisms.”

Cleo didn’t change his decision even after hearing that.

“It’s already a done matter. It’ll be fine. —Count Banfield will surely win. All we have to do is watch and wait.”

Lysithea remained unconvinced until the end.

◇

After the meeting, I gather the main members of the Cleo Faction for a discussion.

The participants are Baron Exner, Kurt’s father; [Francis Sera Ganne], a slim white-haired man; and [Jericho Sera Goal], a muscular man with an eyepatch that makes him look like a pirate.

Jericho grabs a handful of snacks that’s been prepared ahead of time, throws them all into his mouth, and munches on them loudly.

“That sorry excuse of a personal guard thinks he’s hot shit.”

Francis concurs while drinking alcohol.

“It’s only with our tribute that His Highness Cleo was able to form a fleet of 30,000. I’m angry about it as well, but I believe Liam-dono is the one who has the most to say about this situation.”

Jericho and Francis look towards me for my reaction.

It seems they’re asking how we should treat Cleo from now on.

“I heard it was to help court aristocrats who couldn’t find a job? He’s done good, hasn’t he?”

Though I say this, I gulp down all the alcohol at once.

The three that are with me realize that I’m only bottling up my frustration.

Baron Exner reveals his worries about how we should deal with the personal guards.

“It seems his personal guards will participate as supervisors, and watch us fight from the sidelines. I wonder how that will end.”

That’s precisely what Jericho is mad about.

“Those cowards with no decent experience in war will only pull us down. Liam, can’t you refuse to have them participate?”

I could, but I currently owe Cleo a debt—or so the story goes.

In actuality, I very much welcome Theodore’s participation in the war.

“Let them watch if that’s what they want.”

The three of them look each other in the eyes, and Baron Exner asks me a question on behalf of all three of them.

“So.... What happened to Liam-dono’s wedding?”

Right. That.

Rosetta came to see me off when I left, but she never spoke a word about the wedding.

Even so, it felt like her smile was strained.

According to Jericho, wars of this scale will take time, so we should hold a quick ceremony.

“It might take decades if we’re unlucky. Just have a simple ceremony first. When we’re back, you can host a bigger one.”

Francis, on the other hand, seems to think it’s a pity, but advises to take things slow.

“The timing couldn’t have been worse, but there’s nothing we can do about it. The war will take years, even if it ends early. Since our enemies are backed against a corner, they’ll throw everything they’ve got at us. Liam-dono, enemies that are at their wits’ end can be terrifying. I feel sorry for you, but you should be prepared for a long battle.”

Baron Exner remains silent, but he probably agrees with them.

I’m fine with taking my time.

It’s a good excuse to not get married, so I can buy some time with this.

—Having said that, the sad expression that Rosetta showed before my departure flickers in my head.

“Don’t worry. We can talk about this after we win.”

It’s time to settle things with Calvin.

He’s put me in hot water before, so he’s not an easy opponent.

Let’s make sure he doesn’t pull a fast one on us.

Baron Gurin

The support fleet set off for Baron Gurin's territory on the same day it was decided that the wedding would be put on hold for three years.

As the Commander, Liam had to depart as well, so Rosetta was there to see him off.

Beside her were Amagi and Brian.

This was to show the others that Rosetta would be put in charge of all affairs while Liam was absent.

The two people who he trusted most would be by her side to give her their support.

“Darling, please come back safely.” Rosetta said to Liam.

Worried for Liam's well-being, Rosetta prayed for his safe return.

Unlike her, Liam was calm, as if he couldn't imagine himself dying in the war.

However, Liam had a track record of emerging victorious in the face of many adversaries, so the people around him didn't think he was being arrogant.

Instead, they respected his confidence.

Seeing Rosetta so worried, Liam decided to tease her.

“The war this time is a big one. What a pity it is that the wedding had to be canceled.”

He said this knowing full well how much Rosetta looked forward to their wedding.

Rosetta shook her head.

“I don’t mind it being canceled. All that matters is that Darling comes back safe and sound.”

“—What a commendable thing to say.”

No longer finding her worth teasing, Liam looked for Wallace amidst the crowd and called him over.

“Wallace, come over here.”

“Sup?”

Wallace displayed a very casual attitude before Liam, and he didn’t mind this as they had been friends since they were in preschool, not to mention Wallace held a special position in the territory.

He had demonstrated immense talent in preparing for events, and he was responsible for arranging their wedding.

Liam whispered something in his ears, and Wallace looked up in surprise.

“Are you sure? It might all go to waste, you know?”

Rosetta couldn’t hear their conversation just now, but it seemed as if Liam had asked Wallace for something that might prove to be in vain.

Liam glanced at Rosetta.

“It’s fine.”

Liam then headed toward the Super-Dreadnought class battleship with his back facing Rosetta.

Rosetta prayed for his safety while watching his back.

“Dear Lord, please let Darling come back in one piece.”

◇

The air in Baron Gurin’s territory was stale and unpleasant.

While the area surrounding his mansion was well-maintained, everywhere else was like the slums.

The planet had been ravaged to such an extent that there was only a limited number of places where people could live.

Hundreds of years ago, it used to be a planet rich in nature, but the environment had deteriorated immensely after the current head of the family took over the territory.

The environment was destroyed as a result of unreasonable attempts to develop the planet, and things only worsened when they tried to make up for their mistakes.

Nowadays, arcologies were the only places where people could live in.

As for why Baron Gurin would live on such a rundown planet? He didn’t.

He usually lived in the Capital and left his territory unattended.

After experiencing repeated failures in developing the territory, he lost all motivation and started neglecting his territory.

He only realized how bad the situation back home was after returning for the first time in a long while with Theodore.

“Since it’s in such terrible condition, we can expect a lot of resources from Liam.”

That was Baron Gurin’s analysis of the situation.

Theodore was also taken aback by the planet’s condition.

“Wouldn’t it be better to immigrate to Charlow as soon as possible?”

“I don’t like immigrating. It’s too much trouble. Besides, I usually live in the Capital. I don’t come back often, so I can put up with this for now.”

“You can put up with it, you say?”

That went to show how little the Baron cared for the citizens who lived in his territory.

Baron Gurin decided to discuss future matters with Theodore.

“Forget it. Anyway, all I have to do is stall Liam’s forces as much as possible, correct?”

Theodore nodded.

To begin with, he didn’t expect much from Baron Gurin military-wise.

“That will do. He’s fighting a losing battle anyway.”

“If Liam falls in this war, I’d like to be given a position that befits my contribution. I’m sick and tired of this planet.”

Baron Gurin was participating in Cleo’s plan so that he could cut ties with this remote territory and come live in the Capital.

Theodore conveyed Cleo’s message to the Baron.

“As long as the Crown Prince succeeds the throne without any problem, His Highness Cleo has promised to give you a suitable position.”

Baron Gurin patted his chest.

“Then I’ll go all out in stalling Liam’s forces here.”

Theodore smiled and shook hands with the Baron.

“Please give it your all, Baron.”

(You're just a spoiled brat who was born with a golden spoon. Once everything's over, you will be erased, but until then, give it your all.)

◇

The Banfield Family's fleet that numbers in the hundreds of thousands has arrived at Baron Gurin's home planet before the others.

We're steadily growing our forces, but there's no denying that we've put quite a bit of strain on ourselves this time around.

We had to dispatch a fleet to the border which the Empire shares with the Kingdom of Dominion, and we had to leave a fleet behind at the territory to defend our base.

Even so, we were able to gather together a fleet of 300,000 thanks to our hard work throughout the years.

Due to all the development my territory had, we're now able to maintain a fleet of such size.

Of course, the Alchemy Box played a part as well.

Having said that, I'm starting to see a limit even with the Alchemy Box.

Although I could get all the resources I want, it's not like I could just sit there with the Alchemy Box next to me all day long, and I feel uneasy leaving it to someone else.

From now on, we'll have to depend on our own skill to further develop the territory.

“It's great and all that we were the first to arrive...but this is horrible.”

I'm currently looking down at the planet from outer space, but this is truly a sorry sight to behold.

The only livable space is inside the arcologies, which reminds me of the Razel Family where I went to for my training.

But there's a difference. Their planet was in a horrible condition because of resource mining, whereas this Gurin dude destroyed his own planet because he failed to develop it.

"This is what they get for being so incompetent. Should've just shut up and relied on artificial intelligence."

I'm at the bridge of the Super-Dreadnought class battleship, staring down at the floor which is projecting the image of Baron Gurin's home planet.

No matter how developed a society is, if the person at the top is an idiot, there's no saving civilization. I'm astonished by how perfect an example this planet is to that statement.

Tia enthusiastically sucks up to me.

"That's exactly the case, my Lord! Trash that are beneath even ordinary people can never hope to achieve any semblance of development."

I'm fully aware of what I can and cannot do. Hence, if there's something I can't solve, I rely on other people.

I've seen how miserably things end for those that fail to realize this.

Being praised makes me feel better, but the problem we're facing right now is the reception.

"You're right, but there's nowhere to dock our fleet."

It's all good up to the point where we rallied 300,000 ships.

The problem is, this place doesn't have the infrastructure to take in such a fleet.

We tried to confirm this in advance, but Cleo's personal guards insisted that there wouldn't be any problem.

Marie vents her frustration.

“Cause of those useless guards, we can’t even replenish supplies properly. Call the person in charge!”

In response to Marie yelling at the ship’s operator, a call is connected to Theodore, who’s in Baron Gurin’s territory.

‘My my, if it isn’t Count Banfield. As expected, you’ve arrived just on schedule. But shouldn’t you have arrived a bit earlier as proof of your motivation?’

I ignore the nonsense that Theodore is spouting and demand an explanation for the inadequate reception.

“If we’re to talk about motivation, the same goes for you. You’re not even ready to accommodate us.”

‘As I said, Baron Gurin’s territory has suffered a lot of damage. Allies forces will be arriving one after another, so I’d like to ask Count Banfield to build a base for us. I heard you’re pretty good at that.’

Although I do have some experience in constructing bases, it pisses me off that he’s telling me what to do after requesting for my presence.

“So be it. I didn’t expect anything from you guys to begin with. Hey, get it started.”

“Understood.”

Klaus returns a brief reply.

Soon, ships carrying engineers and specialized personnel get to work.

With the supplies we brought, we’ll be building a simple base.

Ships descend one after another to the planet and begin construction of the ground base.

However, this is like pouring a bucket of water to extinguish a forest fire.

The allied fleet that's scheduled to arrive in the future will number over a million.

Although that isn't so big of a number in wars between countries, it's a ridiculous number considering the fact that this is a domestic conflict between aristocrats.

Both sides are giving it their all, hence the number.

Next to me, the Commander, is Klaus, my Head Knight.

Being the reliable man that he is, he's calm and collected like always.

I voice my complaint to him.

"It's sad that we're investing so much manpower, resources, and capital, only to give Baron Gurin a new territory. What do you think about this, Klaus?"

It's a nasty question to answer, but Klaus gives a normal reply.

"Since this battle will determine who becomes the next Emperor, the investment will be worth much more than a single planet."

I project a holographic image of Planet Charlotte on the palm of my hand.

I like it because it feels like the fate of the planet is in my hands.

"Personally, I don't think that's worth much."

"Lord Liam, please refrain from making such dangerous remarks."

Klaus panics a little hearing what I say.

Satisfied, I look at the image of Planet Charlotte and recall memories of Earth.

"—I'm more interested in this planet than whatever status is on the line."



Around the time when the war was about to begin at Planet Charlow, Lysithea, Cleo's older sister, was behaving restlessly at the Capital.

Inside the office room where Cleo was working, she suddenly stood up from the sofa and paced around the room aimlessly.

Seeing this, Cleo let out a small sigh and gave her a reminder.

“Sister, you can worry all you want, but it's not going to change the result of the war.”

Lysithea blushed hearing this.

“Aren't you curious as well!? Elder Sister Cecilia's worried sick.”

“That's because Kurt-dono, her fiancee, is participating.”

Cecilia was the fiancee of Kurt, Liam's best friend, as well as the sibling's older sister.

She had abandoned her inheritance rights and got engaged with Kurt.

Now, she lived at Baron Exner's, which was Kurt's home, and she contacted Lysithea from time to time.

“Liam-dono and Kurt-dono. Even besides those two, there are countless others I don't wish to see dead.”

Cleo felt nauseous hearing Lysithea's innocent wish.

(People die in millions on the battlefield. My sister's too naive.)

Lysithea, who became a knight to protect Cleo, had a nice personality.

However, she was too naive to survive in the court.

Hence, Cleo didn't tell her about him cooperating with Calvin.

“The Count is strong. He’ll definitely return victorious.”

Liam had turned the tables against many adversaries.

Not to mention, he had the advantage over Calvin this time around—or so it seemed, at least.

Lysithea regained her composure after hearing his words.

“You’re right. Liam-dono is powerful after all! Really, there’s nothing he can’t do. Rumors say that the Prime Minister praised how well he dealt with domestic affairs. As long as we have Liam-dono’s support, the Empire will be unshakeable by the time Cleo succeeds the throne!”

Lysithea stated her honest opinion, but Cleo hated that.

“You’re right. So let us believe in the Count’s victory.”

(If Liam wins, the Empire will enter an era of stability. But I’m sure everyone will praise Liam instead of me, and I can’t stand that!)

Cleo clenched his fist hard making sure it’s out of Lysithea’s sight.

(I had to cling on desperately to survive, and now, the Emperor’s seat is within my reach. But that’s precisely why...I hate everything.)

Until now, he was too busy thinking of ways in which he could survive, but now that he was in a safe position, he started to wonder why everything came to be.

Who was to blame?

Was it the Emperor who made an example out of him?

Was it his mother who turned him into a man?

No, it was this country’s very existence that—

Hatred kept accumulating within Cleo.

Lysithea continued talking to him as if to engage in small talk.

“Like really! Liam-dono is incredible. A hero, I say! If he didn’t have a fiance, the ladies wouldn’t have left him alone. Cleo, you too—”

“Sister! I’m a man.”

Cleo loudly interrupted Lysithea’s story and erupted from his seat, his face contorted in anger.

Realizing her mistake, Lysithea apologized.

“S-sorry. Right. You’re a man.”

“Please be more mindful.”

Lysithea felt sorry, but she didn’t back down.

“But in reality, you—”

“That’s enough.”

Cleo didn’t listen to what Lysithea had to say and left the office in frustration.

◇

Inside a laboratory that Cleo had prepared, scientists wearing masks were gathered.

Science, magic—experts in various fields were studying babies that were floating inside a series of capsules.

The person in charge approached Cleo as he entered.

“Your Highness, unfortunately, the vast majority of them aren’t up for the task.”

Cleo frowned at the unfortunate news. Noticing this, the person in charge started making up excuses.

“With educational capsules, we’re installing them with knowledge of the One-Flash, but most of them are dying because of overload.”

The babies floating inside the capsules were clones created using Liam’s genes.

However, many were dying before they could properly grow.

“Such rapid growth places a heavy burden, reducing their lifespan. Installing the data of One-Flash also leads to brain damage. Even if we succeed, the individual will only survive for a few decades maximum.”

Cleo didn’t care about their lifespan.

“It doesn’t matter. We just need them for this battle. Even so, it’s pathetic that there’s no case of success after such mass-production.”

“There has been one.”

The person in charge guided Cleo to another room.

Inside, there was a child with long hair who had grown to be about 10 years of age in a short time.

Cleo immediately felt that something was off.

“So there’s a survivor. But something’s wrong. It seems similar to Liam, but...could it be a girl?”

The person in charge nodded, surprising Cleo.

The man then began to explain the story behind the girl.

“She’s the only successful case albeit being considered a failure in the beginning. Aside from her gender though, she’s closest to the finished form.”

Cleo bent down and looked at the girl.

“—Your name.”

The girl tilted her head, and she turned her gaze somewhere else for a moment.

To Cleo, it felt as if the girl was looking at something invisible.

The girl then opened her mouth.

“No. 3588.”

She hadn’t been given a name and was only known by her number.

“Ok.—And why were you born?”

In response, the girl flashed a lovely smile.

“To kill Liam!”

“—Good girl.”

Cleo stood up and left the room with the person in charge.

Parenting

After Cleo left, the Guide came out of a toy box that was in the corner of the room and approached the girl in his hat form.

“All this hardship, just for them to constantly produce failures. I’ve been getting a decent amount of negative emotions thanks to that, but they really are a bunch of good for nothing!”

The Guide expressed his anger towards Cleo and the manager of the institute, only to be lifted up and hugged by the girl.

“How are we going to play today?”

The girl that Cleo and his associates had prepared to kill Liam was as innocent as a baby.

She didn’t question her orders to kill Liam, and whether the act of killing was considered good or evil didn’t matter to her.

She would do the deed she was told to do, and the Guide was her playmate.

“Let me tell you a story today.”

“Yay! I love Mr. Hat’s stories!”

“This is a tale about how I suffered under the hands of that villainous Liam. That’s right—I used to go around in search of negative emotions, actively making people unhappy. All I wanted was a teeny bit of entertainment.”

The Guide used his arms and legs that stuck out of the hat to emphasize his last point.

“But Liam, this evil man, made my life miserable! He robbed me of all the fun in the world and forced me to accept feelings of gratitude! All I ever did was seek enjoyment from other people’s suffering, yet Liam has deprived me of this joy.”

The girl had undergone accelerated growth and had only been installed with the minimum amount of knowledge, which meant she lacked the ability to accurately judge right from wrong.

Hence, she felt sad after hearing the Guide’s story.

“Poor Mr. Hat.”

Quite frankly, the Guide didn’t like the feeling of being pitied.

‘Why do I have to be pitied by you? Disgusting.’

However, the Guide liked this girl who was miserably unaware of the situation she was in.

(Even so, what a twist of fate. She’s a failed product, yet she’s the one with the highest potential.)

She was a girl despite being Liam’s clone, and the Guide saw her as a complete failure in the beginning.

That said, he helped her as he felt much more at ease helping a girl than clones that looked similar to Liam, and she was still alive precisely because of his help.

“Fufufu, make sure you grow nice and proper so that you can kill Liam one day.”

“Yeah! I’ll do my best!”

The girl grew quickly under the Guide’s parenting.



A giant fleet that belongs to the Cleo Faction has gathered near Baron Gurin's home planet.

Flagships arrive one after another, and aristocrats come aboard my ship [Argos] in small boats where they are then led to a large conference hall.

The super-dreadnought class battleship is needlessly large, spanning over several thousand meters, but the space is still limited.

In spite of the limited space, numerous aristocrats have gathered in the large conference hall for a standing party.

Common sense dictates that we have a meeting and discuss strategies, thereby increasing the chance of winning as much as possible.

However, for a villain such as I, a party is much more to my taste.

To raise our spirits in preparation for the big war ahead, a lavish party is being held.

—Oh how villainous this feels!

“Hmm, I think I’m starting to get the hang of this,” I mutter quietly.

Inside the party venue, I see Baron Exner and Kurt approach me.

“Liam!”

Kurt greets me cheerfully with a raised arm.

When Kurt arrives before me, we shake hands and proceed to talk.

“It’s been a while since we’ve met each other like this. So, how’s military life treating you? All good?”

“I’m fine. I’m taking some time off from the military though.”

“I see that you’re as serious as ever. Don’t forget that you’ll be succeeding the Exner Family. Before you take over the territory, you should let loose

and play around.”

“I don’t have the leeway to play around.”

“That sounds just like what you’d say. Give me a call when you want to return to the military. I’ll send a messenger over telling them to give you preferential treatment.”

“Liam hasn’t changed one bit, huh.”

We’ve contacted each other on several occasions, but it’s been a long time since we met face-to-face like this.

It’s different meeting someone in person, and our conversation starts to heat up.

Just at the right time, Baron Exner joins us.

“What a grand party this is. No one would think we’re heading for war after seeing this.”

The Baron appears exasperated, but even more so impressed by the scale of the party and the venue, not to mention the luxury inside my flagship.

Baron Exner and Kurt are fellow evil lords, but they don’t flaunt their wealth like I do.

Furthermore, the size of their territory is much smaller compared to mine, a Count’s.

I very much respect how they try to squeeze out as much as possible from such a small territory, but the problem lies in the fact that they’re satisfied with that alone.

They should learn how to spend as well; as of now, they try to save money almost to a fault.

“Please enjoy your time here. Oh, and would Kurt be participating in the war on the Baron’s flagship?”

I turn the conversation towards Baron Exner, and Kurt takes a step back, not taking part in the discussion.

Since a discussion is being held between the heads of the families, as someone who's still in the position of a successor, it seems he's withdrawn from the conversation.

"I'll be leaving him with a hundred ships from my fleet. He's still too inexperienced to be on the front lines. As such, I'll have him watch from the rear."

"Indeed. In case of an unfortunate accident, things would turn ugly if the head of the family and its successor is on the same ship. Shall I have him join up with my reserve force?"

"Will that be alright?"

If they have a powerful fleet like mine, they can be on the same ship together.

However, it's normal to split up so as to avoid the worst-case scenario where both the head and the successor die at the same time.

"Yes. In fact, I've offered this to the others as well."

There are quite a number of parents who wish to have their beloved sons and daughters stay in the rear.

The opposite is true as well.

In some cases, the successors are put on the front lines while the family heads stay in the rear.

It's my duty as the Commander to make sure that the people who get sent to the rear get to spend a luxurious time.

—In reality though, they serve as hostages.

If the family heads and the successors on the front line misbehave, the hostages will lose their lives.

Understandably, Baron Exner seems a little hesitant, but he eventually promises to leave Kurt with me.

“Then I’ll leave him to you.”

I won’t treat him as a hostage. As long as he follows orders, he’ll be able to have a good time in the back.

◇

After Kurt left Liam, he went around to greet other aristocrats who would be in the rear helping out with the logistics.

He wanted to speak a bit more with Liam, but he understood that the latter was very busy as the fleet’s Commander.

Even at parties like this, aristocrats would come to greet him one after another, and dealing with them was a part of his duties as Commander.

“Just like always, he’s got things together.”

While holding a glass of liquor, Kurt watched Liam from a distance before turning to look at the party venue.

‘Why are they having a party before a war?’ some might ask.

If military officers were to hear of this party, they’d be irked, with only those at the rank of General and above showing some understanding.

Even though people here had some military experience, they were, at the end of the day, aristocrats.

They preferred parties over meetings, and conversations flowed better when they were at parties.

The right clothes for the right occasion—that was Kurt’s evaluation.

(If you spend too much time in the military, you start forgetting about what it's like being an aristocrat.)

Liam personally met with a number of family heads and their successors, telling them that they would be sent to the rear as logistic personnel.

The anxiety on their faces was wiped clean, though many were still worried as they were being sent to the rear in exchange for business-related favors.

As he looked at the faces around him, Kurt noticed a woman walking up to him.

She was a short-haired woman wearing a dress with short skirts, and she appeared rather embarrassed.

When she arrived near Kurt, she stopped on her track and greeted him.

“I’m Marion from the family of Viscount Olgren. Kurt-dono, I’d presume?”

“That would indeed be me. Olgren, you say...are you perhaps a family member of Margrave Olgren, the one responsible for keeping the Empire’s border with the Kingdom of Dominion?”

“I’m from the branch family.”

Kurt recalled Liam’s story seeing the smile on [Marion Sera Olgren].

(The traitor who snuggled up to Liam so that she could leak information to the enemies?)

He narrowed his eyes ever so slightly in disgust, and Marion caught this.

“There’s no need to get worked up about it. The Count’s forgiven me.—Or rather, I’m still being punished for it.”

Marion liked to dress up as a man, even as she attended parties, yet Liam forced her to join this party all dolled up.

Some piqued Kurt’s interest.

“I thought neither the main family nor the branch family of Margrave Olgren would be joining the war?”

“I’m a hostage. The main family wants to show the world that the Olgren Family will always be by the Count’s side. If I’m all that’s needed to show this, it’s a cheap price for them to pay.”

Yare yare, seeing Marion shake her head, Kurt put his lips on the glass of liquor.

As a woman who betrayed Liam, Kurt couldn’t see her in a favorable light.

“It’s a miracle you’re still alive after betraying Liam.”

“In exchange, he humiliates me and works my fingers to the bone. Liam-senpai is a real slave driver.”

Marion expressed her frustration of being dressed up as a woman.

While ranting about how Liam “worked her to the bone”, she looked around at her surrounding in a particular manner.

(Is something going on? Also, she’s calling Liam her senpai—she’s being overly familiar with him.)

Kurt felt something was wrong.

Marion bowed and left

“I’ll be excusing myself as I have a lot of things I have to do.”

◇

In the corner of the party venue, Baron Gurin was enjoying the sake and the food that were being served.

“Wonderful. These drinks and food are all items that aren’t available in my territory. Even in the Capital, these would be considered rare luxuries.”

Theodore, who was watching the Baron up close, had a frown on his face.

“Baron, have you forgotten your role here?”

“Don’t worry. I’ve begun extracting resources out of Liam and breaking down the faction from within. How about your side?”

When the subject of the conversation shifted to him, Theodore began talking about what he’s been doing.

“I’ll be boarding Liam’s flagship and monitoring him from the side.—Please be careful with how you handle inside information.”

“But of course.”

Theodore tries his best to mask his frustration while watching Baron Gurin go crazy with the food and drinks.

(People that are born into riches are well and truly useless.)

Despite being born into nobility, Theodore’s status was low, which eventually led to an inferiority complex.

To him, this party was no different from a joke.

(A war is imminent, yet they’re having a party while being completely at home. When His Highness Cleo takes the throne, we’ll have them all eliminated, and I’ll receive a position I rightfully deserve.)

He was burning with an ambition to make it big as an aristocrat.

◇

After the party ends and everyone disbands, I return to my room.

“Welcome back, Master.”

“—What are you doing inside my room?”

With three robot maids behind her, Eulisia bows at me.

For some reason, she's in a maid outfit.

“At least pretend like you're happy!”

“Those are my maids' costumes, and to begin with, your task this time is to act as my support.”

What's she doing? Has she forgotten her responsibilities?

Seeing me pull back, Eulisia starts crying on the spot while shouting
“You're terrible!”

“I mean, you're about to marry Lady Rosetta, but you haven't made my position any clearer! Aren't I supposed to assist you on the battlefield and such? Then being your partner at night is also part of my—”

“I already have one.”

I cut her off, to which Eulisia makes a pathetic display of herself by clinging to me as she cries.

“You don't! There's clearly nobody here to act as your partner!”

“Silence! My marriage is right around the corner!”

Eulisia makes a scene, and I receive a call just as I'm trying to peel her off of me.

“Who's this?—Kukuri?”

Last Stand

On the other side of the monitor is Kukuri, who I've sent to the Capital, and when I hear his report, I close my eyes in annoyance.

“—The Seventh Weapons Factory was robbed of the mass-produced Avids?”

‘Yes, the Calvin Faction had the Empire requisition them. The Seventh Weapons Factory was then placed under surveillance to stop them from reporting to Lord Liam.’

Inside the monitor, some distance behind Kukuri, I can see a teary-eyed Nias crying on the floor.

‘My rare metals~’

She’s devastated that her rare metals were taken away, so much so that she doesn’t seem to mind the fact that she was put under surveillance.

Seeing this, Eulisia, who’s in her maid outfit, makes an indescribable expression.

“To think you’d worry about rare metals even in such dire circumstances.”

‘B-but all the rare metals that I’ve been stockpiling had to be put into mass-producing Avids again! All my plans are ruined! They said it’s ’cause they have to start building them from scratch again. That’s too cruel, I say! Lord Liam, can you prepare some more rare metals for me?’

Even Kukuri seems perplexed by her shamelessness.

Nias looks at me in the eyes, not showing any signs of asking about why Eulisia is in a maid outfit.

That just goes to show how upset she is about her losses.

Kukuri awaits my instructions.

‘Lord Liam, your orders please.’

“I’m busy at the moment, so I can’t prepare any rare metals for you. That said, Calvin’s awfully impatient this time. What does he wish to accomplish by robbing the mass-produced aircraft?”

If it was simply to reduce our firepower, I’d have to say that it wasn’t the right move.

To begin with, I wasn’t planning on having Fuuka, Rinho, and Ellen participate in the war.

My juniors are too busy doting on Yasuyuki to care anyway.

Hence, if he did it to reduce our strength, it would be considered a failure on his part.

Since he had the Empire forcibly take the aircraft away from us, he would no doubt come under fire from the other aristocrats, not because they wish to protect me, but because of their fear of one day having *their* properties seized from them.

Kukuri responds to my inquiry.

‘We’re collecting information inside the Capital, and it seems like the Calvin Faction is making a lot of risky moves, opposite of how they normally behave.’

“Are they putting their all into this battle?”

‘Yes. Calvin’s been pushed to a corner. Lord Liam, there’s something I wish to inform you about.’

“What is it?”



At the Capital, Calvin came out of the room where the Emperor resided, appearing extremely exhausted.

His knights who were waiting outside approached Calvin to support him, but he had them step back.

“It’s fine.”

“But Your Highness, you’ll collapse at this rate.”

“Don’t worry about it. If others see me being supported as I walk, they would find it strange.”

After adjusting his breath, Calvin started walking as he recalled his meeting with [Bagrada Noah Algrand], the Emperor of the Algrand Empire.

(Father has changed since he took the throne. He used to be a kind man, yet none of his former kindness can be seen anywhere.)

During his childhood, his father had been kind and gentle.

However, everything changed after he became the Emperor.

(That’s what it means to bear the weight of the crown.)

The pressure that he felt from the Emperor was so great that just talking to him drained Calvin of his mental and physical strength.

Calvin had also been training, but the feeling of intimidation that came from his father was something else.

“Why did His Majesty request for Your Highness?” a worried knight asked.

Upon being asked about the sudden summon, Calvin replied, not stopping on his track.

He was walking at a fast pace, trying to shake off his concerns.

“If I lose in this proxy war, I’ll be stripped of my position as Crown Prince, and the position would be given to Cleo.—Then, I’ll be handed over to Count Banfield.”

Hearing this, the knights became pale.

Calvin has had numerous conflicts with Liam in the past

Once he was handed over to Liam, the latter could do whatever he pleased with the prince.

Not to imply anything dirty, but he would be allowed to take things out on the prince for everything he’s done throughout the years.

Worse came to worst, if the enemy faction got hold of him, Calvin might eventually rue the day he was born.

“I-is it because of the requisition? Your Highness, how can we be sure that Cleo hasn’t betrayed us?”

“Nothing would come of worrying over that. Instead, we should focus on trying to win.”

(That’s right. There’s nowhere left for me to retreat.)

He thought of his family, namely his wife and children.

(If I were to fail, my family will be erased. I must avoid that at all costs.)

An aristocrat that belonged to his faction rushed up to him with a bright expression on his face.

“I bring good news, Your Highness!”

◇

“DAMN IT ALL!!”

At the bridge of her battleship, Marie roared in anger, kicking her chair and destroying it.

The monitor showed the wreckage of the Cleo Faction's fleet.

Clearly frightened, the operator confirmed their next course of action with Marie.

"W-we've picked up distress signals, h-hence we'll be moving to their rescue."

"Hurry up!"

Marie was frustrated as their allied troops had suffered defeat at the hands of the enemies.

She had rushed to their rescue, but she was too late, and the enemies had escaped.

"CHRISTINA! That minced woman must be shittin' with me!"

She hacked at her broken chair several times with her sword to relieve her stress, frightening those around her.

Marie was furious as Tia had been put in charge of their command while she was stuck wiping the latter's ass when she failed.

Exasperated, Marie's lieutenant tried to calm her down.

"Please calm yourself. Lady Marie isn't at fault here."

"But *I'm* the one that has to report to Lord Liam that we weren't able to rescue our allies on time! And yet you're telling me to put up with that!?
Cuz of that minced meat's mistake, I have betrayed Lord Liam's expectations! I refuse to let that go!"

Her lieutenant shrugged before smiling lightly.

“But it’s not all bad, is it? –Use this chance to kick her down. Then, Lady Marie can stand next to Lord Liam in her stead.”

“–You’re right. We’re heading back the moment we’re done with this rescue mission. I’ll report that minced woman’s mistakes to Lord Liam.”

“That would be wise. We haven’t had the upper hand since the beginning of the war.”

Several months had passed since the war began, and the Cleo Faction had suffered defeat after defeat.

Though the defeats were minor and only served to put them at a slight disadvantage, Liam’s reputation would inevitably drop if they continued to lose.

Marie couldn’t accept this and bit her nails.

“–But it’s strange that she’s off the marks by this much.”

Marie was usually hostile to Tia, but she still approved of Tia’s abilities.

Her lieutenant pointed out the possibility that the enemies might have a good commander as well.

“There must a good commander on their side. Besides, the Calvin Faction has been pushed to a corner. Wouldn’t that explain their unity?”

“Sure, there’s that, but my sixth sense is tingling. –Someone on our side is providing information to the enemies.”

When spies were brought up, her lieutenant didn’t seem too surprised.

“But of course. We’ve sent some over as well.”

“I think the traitor is someone standing close to Lord Liam. –Investigate Theodore thoroughly.”

Her instincts pointed to Theodore’s betrayal.



Around the same time, Tia, who had not only failed to send rescue personnel in time but also suffered countless defeats, had her head hung low before Liam.

Her face was pale, and cold sweat ran down her forehead.

Theodore, who stood next to Liam, couldn't help but laugh at the female knight's pitiful figure, remembering how she was treated better than him despite only being a vassal.

"Months have passed since the war commenced. What do you have to say for yourself, Miss Christina?"

Tia raised her head and glared at him.

Theodore, bearing the brunt of her killing intent, took a step back.

"W-what's with that attitude!? It seems she doesn't feel responsible for our losses. Off with her head, now!"

Liam intercepted Theodore's speech.

"Tia is my knight. You have no right to make such decisions."

Annoyed at being pointed out the truth, Theodore attacked Liam as the military supervisor.

"Then who's going to take responsibility for this? His Highness Cleo is greatly disappointed by our continuous defeats."

(But well, I guess I *am* leaking your information.)

Theodore laughed vulgarly in his heart, but he noticed Klaus's gaze coming from the other side of Liam and collected himself.

(-Anyway, why isn't he dispatching the knight he's most proud of? Sure, this female knight might be top-notch, but she's still inferior compared to

Klaus.)

Some time has passed since the war began, but Liam hadn't sent Klaus to the battlefield yet.

All he did was help Liam with minor adjustments, so in Theodore's eyes, Klaus wasn't being used to his maximum potential.

(Since he hasn't sent Klaus in yet, does it mean he's not serious? Is he giving the young knight a chance to gain experience?)

Theodore tried to guess what was going through Liam's mind, but he felt creeped out by the stares that Klaus occasionally gave him.

The man in question didn't utter a word and only looked at him in silence—terrifying Theodore greatly as he worried that his cover was blown.

(As expected, he's a dangerous man. If not for him, I would've sent Liam to his grave by now.)

He had been leaking information to the enemies to defeat Liam, but the results hadn't been great.

◇

The time he hated most was finally over.

After Klaus returned to his room, he finished some of his tasks and fished out his prized stomach pills from his desk drawer.

“Haaa...Our military supervisor, Theodore-dono, should be milder in his speech. I get that he's angry that we keep losing, but being angry won't get him anywhere.”

The Cleo Faction's fleet lacked cohesion as Theodore kept butting into certain matters.

“Also, should I bring that up to him? No, would that hurt his pride?”

Klaus was racking his brain over a matter related to Theodore.

That being...

“If I point out that his nose hair is showing, he’ll probably feel humiliated. I wonder if I should point it out or not. Has nobody else noticed? But then again, Lord Liam doesn’t bother looking at Theodore-dono’s face very much.”

...Theodore’s nose hair.

They were normally hidden, but his nostrils widened whenever he mocked others, revealing his nose hair for the world to see.

After noticing this, Klaus couldn’t help but worry about what he should do with Theodore.

To point out or not to point out, that was the question for Klaus.

“If Lord Liam notices, he’ll probably tell him outright, but he doesn’t make that kind of expression before Lord Liam.”

He even thought of gifting Theodore a nose hair treatment tool, but he could easily imagine how angry Theodore would be for hurting his pride.

And that was why Klaus was in a dilemma.

“—In the first place, why’s my position next to Lord Liam? If I wasn’t beside him, I wouldn’t have noticed the nose hair.”

He wondered why his designated spot was beside Liam.

After all, all he did was take care of some miscellaneous tasks.

He was aware of being Liam’s Head Knight, but it felt like he was been overestimated.

“Ahh~the medicine’s working its magic.”

Just as he was about to go to sleep after taking his favorite medicine, he received a call.

“Who’s calling me at this hour? –L-Lord Liam!?”

It was a call from Liam.

Conditions for Victory

Several months have passed since the war began, and contrary to popular belief, the Calvin Faction has continued to clinch victories after victories, giving them the upper hand.

With how large the battlefield is this time, our fleets had to be dispersed.

They have scattered in groups of tens of thousands and are fighting against the enemies at various points on the battlefield.

Which fleet has taken over a satellite base? Which fleet has conquered a space station? Which fleet has defeated an enemy fleet?

I've been receiving an endless number of reports on a daily basis, and it has been my job to organize them.

However, I had Klaus and the others handle such miscellaneous tasks.

—As a result of leaving everything to my subordinates, our side suffered successive defeats and is now at a disadvantage.

It's no wonder that Theodore, our military supervisor, is dissatisfied.

—Having said that, I have neither the heart nor the spirit to care about his opinion.

“Now, let's hear your excuses.”

I've called upon Klaus, my Head Knight, and the problematic-yet-competent Tia and Marie duo.

Klaus is standing next to my chair whereas Tia and Marie are in a seiza.

When asked for an explanation, Marie immediately glares at Tia.

“It’s all because of this minced woman! Lord Liam, please hand me the right to command the fleet. I promise to bring us victory within a decade’s time.”

Ten years of war.

It’s neither too long nor too short.

Wars of such magnitude can easily last for decades if you’re unlucky.

To illustrate how difficult it is for there to be a clear victor, there are stories out there that talk about battles that lasted for centuries, a notion that sounds like a sick joke.

Hence, it’s common to decide on the victor through negotiation where the side with the upper hand comes out on top.

That’s what Marie means when she promises to bring “victory within a decade’s time”.

Tia, who’s been forced to take all the blame, scowls.

“Shut up, fossil woman! Lord Liam, I’m certainly responsible for our current situation, but please give me a chance to redeem myself. In ten years...no, I promise victory within eight years!”

Marie has promised victory within ten years while Tia has promised victory within eight.

It’s good and all that they’re feeling competitive, but I don’t have eight years to spare.

“That’s too long. Settle it within two.”

Hearing me put forth the deadline, even Klaus, who’s been listening as a bystander, widens his eyes.

“W-we’ll try our best to satisfy Lord Liam’s wishes, but two years would be impossible,” Tia claims, dazed.

Marie reluctantly agrees with Tia’s opinion, having come to the same conclusion.

“As frustrating as it is to admit, the minced woman is right. We’ve set our eyes on who the traitor could be, but getting rid of him will take some time, even if our predictions are right.”

It seems both Tia and Marie are aware of the traitor.

“So you noticed? Good. If you were too incompetent to realize who the traitor is, I would’ve had to reevaluate your worth. Right, Klaus?”

“Huh?”

His reply’s a bit different from usual, but Klaus had sniffed out the traitor from the very beginning.

He’s always been concerned about Theodore, who usually stood on the other side of me, and had his eyes locked on him.

“I’ve done some digging, and Baron Gurin is also suspicious. –Marion”

When I snap my fingers, the door to the room opens, and Marion, who’s dressed in frilled clothes, enters.

Seeing her teary eyes, I praise her appearance.

“It fits you really well. Do you like my present?”

“Senpai’s got bad taste as usual.”

Knowing that I was the one who prepared her outfit, Tia and Marie turn to Marion in jealousy.

Frightened by their killing intent, Marion hurriedly rushes to my side and starts talking about the things she told me earlier.

“I performed an investigation under Senpai’s orders and learned that Baron Gurin didn’t experience any sort of war. The territory is in such a condition because of his horrible management. Unlike someone, everything he did ended in failure. Reports say he’s met up with Theodore on several occasions.”

Marion, who was my junior during my time as a bureaucrat, is subpar as a knight, but she’s good at gathering intelligence.

I had her work behind the scenes, and it seems Baron Gurin got caught on her radar.

However, everyone here knew that already, and nobody is surprised by this revelation.

It’s a rather boring response, but I’m glad that none of them are incompetent.

“And that’s why I’ll have Theodore and Baron Gurin crushed. You guys are to bring me victory within two years.”

To end the war in two years with our side emerging as the victors.

Upon hearing the conditions, Klaus, who’s been silent until now, opens his mouth with a heavy heart.

“Lord Liam, that’s too reckless. Theodore-dono is a member of His Highness Cleo’s personal guards, and His Highness has promised Baron Gurin that we’d help. Even if we eliminate these two and their subordinates, ending the war in two years is unrealistic.”

I know full well that it goes against common sense, but I really want to end the war within two years.

“—This is an order. Win the war within two years.”

Klaus and Tia are still troubled by my fixation on two years, but Marie’s expression becomes determined.

For some reason, her eyes are shining, and she's looking at me as if she's moved, which is kind of annoying.

I cross my legs and behave more grandiosely so as to hide my true intentions.

"Now then, how can we win in two years? Tell me your ideas. I'll tolerate some degree of sacrifice."

When asked for a plan, neither Tia nor Marie claims to not have one.

Though they don't think it would work, they tell me their plans nonetheless.

Tia goes first.

"If we can land a powerful blow on the enemy's main force, we can overturn the situation in one go. To do that, we would need to first lure them in by pretending like we're retreating. Once our enemies start gaining momentum and become complacent, we'll counterattack by focusing on a single point in their formation, breaking through and striking their main force.— However, the problem with this plan is that when people see that our enemies are gaining momentum, some aristocrats will join in the fray, wanting a piece of the pie. Some of our allies will probably desert the battlefield, further widening the difference in numbers. For these reasons, I wouldn't recommend going with this plan."

Not to mention, we would have to decide whereabouts in their formation to break through, and what we thought of as the enemies' main force could turn out to be something completely different.

Another problem is that doing something so forceful would lead to further casualties on our part.

Considering what's to come in the future, I'd like to preserve my strength as much as possible.

Marie thinks up a slightly different strategy.

“Though it’s not an ideal plan to use against fellow aristocrats of the same nation, we can form a strike force that would attack our enemies’ home planets. If they hear that their home planets are under attack, the aristocrats will be forced to return. By taking advantage of their absence, we can launch an offensive with our full force and bring an early end to the war. However...looking at it from the long term, I don’t recommend this strategy.”

“It’s similar to what the Berkeley Family did in the past.”

This is a battle to determine the next Emperor.

If I were to launch an attack on the enemy aristocrats’ home planets, it’ll be as if I shot them while their backs were turned.

I don’t mind dirtying my hands, but if I do that in this battle, people would point fingers behind my back.

People on our side would also disapprove of what I did, and I’d lose my credibility, which makes this plan detrimental in the long run.

I would be labeled a coward who broke the unwritten rules, and our enemies will also form strike forces of their own to use against me.

I cross my fingers and grin.

“Indeed, both plans have flaws in them, so we can’t adopt them.”

Tia and Maire seem relieved that their plans weren’t implemented.

They must have been hoping for this result.

I turn towards Klaus, my reliable knight.

“Well, what’s your take on this?”

Klaus remains silent for a moment without revealing any emotions, but he eventually opens his mouth, unable to withstand my stare.

◇

(Why is he asking me!?)

Klaus was panicking in his heart.

He couldn't reply with a quick "No clue" after seeing Liam's eyes which screamed, "I expect great things from you".

Tia's and Marie's proposals were rejected, but they still presented their ideas to him.

(For the time being, should I think of a plan that Lord Liam would definitely reject? What kind of strategy would Lord Liam never implement? He said he'll tolerate some degree of sacrifice. Does he mean that in terms of soldiers? Then if it's his personal reputation—)

Klaus made up his mind and presented an idea that he believed Liam would never accept.

"What if we withdraw from the battle over Planet Charlow?"

"What?"

Liam was perplexed.

Tia and Maries stared at Klaus with cold eyes.

Liam had never known defeat before. Putting a stain on this legend of the undefeated was something they could not tolerate.

However, that was precisely what Klaus was aiming for.

"Winning in this war would only be to Baron Gurin's benefit, so we will focus our attention solely on the succession war."

Liam didn't look pleased with this, but he told Klaus to continue.

“The enemies are currently heading for Baron Gurin’s home planet. Losing it would signify our defeat, but we can challenge them to a decisive battle afterward, justifying it under the excuse of rescuing the Baron—though I admit it’s not the best excuse to come up with.”

Klaus’s strategy, which he fleshed out as he talked, was to gather the enemies in one place before annihilating them.

This plan incorporated both Tia and Marie’s ideas.

It was something he came up with after hearing the two’s plan and held no deeper meaning.

Liam would definitely reject such a plan, and the two girls would make sure of this.

However, Liam showed a strong interest in this idea.

“I see—if it’s on Baron Gurin’s home planet, it wouldn’t matter even if we were to go wild, and we’ll be able to eliminate him amidst the confusion.”

Klaus was shocked when he realized that Liam was about to adopt his plan.

“L-Lord Liam?”

(Eh? What’s happening?)

Klaus tried to stop Liam, but Marie beat him to it.

“Please reconsider! The biggest flaw to this plan is that people would start suspecting Lord Liam’s skills, and people would blame Lord Liam for failing to protect the Baron. Even if we prove that he’s a traitor later on, the fact that we lost would not change.”

Tia was of the same mind, but Liam stood up before applauding Klaus.

“As expected of you, Klaus. It’s a great strategy where we can get rid of the traitors while achieving our goals. We’ll be adopting your strategy.”

Klaus was horrified by Liam's decision.

“For real?”

(If you do that, what would become of your reputation!?)

To that, Liam showed a happy smile.

“I was getting annoyed that we’re doing all this to benefit Baron Gurin. Now then, let’s start going into the specifics. –As for you, Marion, you’ve heard too much, so you’ll have to be detained for a while.”

Marion, who had been listening to their conversation, gave herself up easily and quietly put her hands forward.

“I knew I wouldn’t be able to leave after hearing so much. I’ll be released after the war ends, correct? Ah, if it’s possible, I’d like a cute girl as my prison guard. I demand good treatment.”

“You’ll be released when everything’s over, but you’ll have to do without a cute girl.”

“Senpai’s stingy.”

Marion would be detained for hearing their future plans.

Klaus was lamenting the fact that something so ridiculous was happening.

“Are we really proceeding with this plan? It’s not a very commendable method of winning, and Lord Liam’s reputation would suffer a hit. I don’t recommend it.”

Liam showed Klaus a daring smile.

“It’s fine. If my reputation is all it takes to win, you can take as much advantage of it as you’d like. As I said—I’m willing to make some sacrifices.”

(Why is this happening!?)

Klaus was drained of all his blood.

He didn't think Liam would sacrifice even his own reputation.

Liam, who was considered absolute for better or for worse, often benefitted from his reputation.

Yet he was willing to throw that away to end the war early.

—Klaus had misunderstood Liam.

(This is the worst!)

With arms spread, Liam made a declaration.

“Now, let's start by bringing closure to our battle with Calvin.”

The Tsuri-No-Base Strategy

At the bridge of Argos, Liam's ship, Theodore was laughing inwardly as he took special care to remain expressionless.

(The fact that Liam's faction is collapsing so quickly shows how fragile it is.)

Inside the bridge, the faces of aristocrats belonging to the Cleo Faction were being projected in the air, and they all seemed to resent and blame Liam for their losses.

‘Count Banfield, this is all your fault!’

‘You better watch your back from now.’

‘I expected more from you.’

Half a year had passed since the war began, and the war was progressing completely in favor of the Calvin Faction.

The Cleo Faction had lost most of the territories it held and had to retreat to the rear.

Many fleets had fled, while some aristocrats turned coats to join the enemy faction.

The aristocrats present in the meeting were there to condemn Liam.

However-

“Is that all? If so, pack up your belongings and scram. I’ll fight Calvin alone.”

-being the young and ambitious man that he was, Liam didn't seem to realize that it was time to throw in the towels.

Not only did he fail to keep his allies together, he tried to intimidate them through his anger.

Everyone else knew that the match was over, but Liam still held on to the hopes of winning.

Theodore found this delightful.

(Yes. Continue to struggle and shed more blood. Once this war is over, you'll never be able to go up against His Highness Cleo ever again. It's a fitting end for a young master of a Count's family.)

He looked around and found Tia and Marie facing the floor with bitter expressions.

“Lord Liam, we'll only rack up more losses if we continue.”

“Lord Liam, victory and defeat have been decided. We should either withdraw or enter negotiations.”

The two talented knights tried to advise him, but Liam refused to listen.

“Silence! Your only task was to bring me victory.—Tia, Marie. You two have failed me multiple times throughout the course of this war. Since you guys are so incompetent, I'll have you two help with transporting the injured instead.”

Their new task was to help the injured and collect weapons left behind on the battlefield, escorting them to safety.

As a result, both Tia and Marie were forced to leave the frontline.

In the end, even Klaus stepped forward to dissuade Liam from continuing.

“Lord Liam, the war has ended. Baron Gurin's home planet is right behind us. We might have the advantage as the defender, but we're outnumbered

four to one.”

In response to his advice, Liam brought up his past records with the space pirates.

“Then it should be fine. I’ve overcome differences in number numerous times. I’ll be able to manage somehow.”

“B-but!”

“—Klaus, step aside if you can’t follow my orders.”

Theodore decided that it was time to take action after seeing Liam dismiss all his talented personnel.

(This ended faster than expected. Now that he’s shooed his close subordinates away, things should be much easier for us.)

◇

Once Theodore was alone on the ship, he connected with Baron Gurin.

Directly sending information to the enemy ran the risk of being noticed.

On the contrary, there was nothing strange about contacting an ally, and he could come up with excuses even if he was suspected.

He was there to report the situation, and he did so through a series of pre-determined exchanges.

“Our side is in a precarious situation. You should prepare yourself, Baron Gurin.”

Considering the Cleo Faction’s current status, there wasn’t anything strange about what he said.

Hearing this, Baron Gurin opened his eyes.

‘Understood. I shall put up a valiant resistance.’

Their conversation sounded as if they were being forced into a corner, but it was all scripted.

What they truly meant was “Liam’s been driven to an edge. Get ready to surrender,” and “Copy that.”

Baron Gurin had no intention of fighting from the very start and planned on surrendering the moment the Calvin Faction arrived.

Theodore confirmed with him one last time.

“The Banfield Family has dispatched a defense force, is that correct?”

‘Yes, and I’ll have them do their best. It was worth the effort going through the trouble of borrowing them.’

Under the excuse that his home planet was in a vulnerable state, he had forcefully borrowed a fleet from Liam to act as a defense force.

Once he surrendered, he was thinking of handing them over to the Calvin Faction, and if they resisted, they would be attacked from both sides.

“With this, we should end the call.”

‘Please make sure to be careful.’

When their call ended, Theodore revealed a vulgar smile.

“With this, I’ll be able to become a real aristocrat.”

◇

A year after the start of the war...

At the Capital, Calvin jerked up from his chair upon receiving news of the war.

The young aristocrat who had brought the news had teary eyes.

Calvin demanded the man report again.

“We really won!?”

“Yes, Your Highness! Our army has defeated the Banfield Family and occupied Baron Gurin’s home planet! The Baron has surrendered, and while the defense force dispatched to the ground by the Banfield Family is continuing to resist, suppressing them will only be a matter of time.”

Conquering Baron Gurin’s home planet was an undisputed sign of their victory.

“I’m not convinced. Doesn’t Count Banfield still have Klaus, his right-hand man?”

“According to our spy, Banfield insisted on pushing forward despite Klaus’s warnings.”

Will Liam really do such a thing?

Instead of relief, Calvin felt more worried.

“—And what of Cleo?”

The young aristocrat switched from being in a dreamy state to reporting with a serious expression.

He too was concerned with Cleo’s behavior.

“Our Black Ops personnel have been watching him, but he hasn’t made any suspicious moves. He doesn’t appear to be contacting Liam in any way, and everything is going as planned. To be honest, something feels wrong.”

Cleo, who had been in the lead when it came to the battle for succession, had come to seek help from Calvin, who had been backed to a wall.

Anyone would’ve found this suspicious.

At that time, Calvin had no choice but to take his hand.

If he had killed Cleo there and then, Liam would've simply found someone else to replace him.

It would be meaningless to do so, and Cleo had never been the subject of Calvin's fear.

It had always been Liam, and he chose to cooperate with Cleo as the latter wasn't as terrifying as the former.

But Calvin still couldn't wrap his head around what had happened with Cleo, not to mention Liam's defeat.

"Tell our allies not to become complacent. If Count Banfield was such an easy opponent, we wouldn't have been driven to a corner in the first place."

Calvin gave the order to remain sharp, and the young aristocrat straightened his back in response.

"I'll relay your order, Your Highness!"

"Good, I'll remind them again myself later on."

Things had ended so smoothly that he couldn't bring himself to feel relieved, worried that this might all be a big trap of some kind.

After the young aristocrat left his office, Calvin held his head in his hands.

"It's over. I've won. But why does he still terrify me so much?"

To get rid of his anxiety, Calvin decided to hold himself back from feeling happy until he had well and truly won.

◇

At Baron Gurin's home planet, there were thousands of battleships floating above the arcology that functioned as cities, blocking sunlight from reaching the ground.

At the bridge of one of the battleships, a Calvinist aristocrat who was the fleet's commander was basking in his victory.

He was a commander leading a fleet consisting of several thousand ships.

“His Highness the Crown Prince mentioned a secret weapon, but we didn’t need something like that after all.”

His second-in-command shared his sentiment.

“A secret weapon wouldn’t be a secret weapon anymore if it’s revealed.”

“You’re right. And there’s the saying that we should let sleeping dogs lie.”

The secret weapon sent by Calvin took up much space in the ship as the weapon required careful adjustments to be made. It wasn’t easy to handle, so specialized staff had been sent as well.

The commander, however, had not been told of the details.

He wanted to know what the weapon was, but he didn’t want to get involved in anything dangerous.

The commander looked down at the arcology from one of the windows with his second-in-command.

“Anyway, what a horrible condition it’s in. I’m a lord as well, but I can assure you that this is the worst territory there is.”

“Baron Gurin’s a notorious fool. It’s a mystery as to why His Highness Cleo roped him in.”

“Must be something to do with politics. Not that I would know.”

The commander hadn’t been informed of the situation.

His second-in-command told him about their future schedule.

“Leaving that aside, we won too spectacularly. We’d need to re-schedule everything.”

“It’s not over, is it? On the ground, there’s still a unit that belongs to the Banfield Family. I heard our allies are heading there, yes?”

“Baron Gurin has told us exactly how many of the ground forces there are. Getting rid of them will only take some time.”

“—I wouldn’t want someone like that on my side.”

The end to the war was in sight.

Just as the two were feeling relieved, an ally ship floating a few kilometers away suddenly exploded.

Surprised, they turned to look as the battleship exploded and plummeted to a location near the arcology.

The second-in-command shouted at the operator.

“Report what’s happening!”

“We’re being attacked from the sky!”

“Enemy attack? But there should be allied ships up in space.”

The sirens rang, telling them to assume first-class alert.

Meanwhile, allied ships continued to explode, lighting up the sky.

Some of them started attacking, but it was allied ships that fell.

Allied ships rained down on them, crashing into one another.

“Is it the Banfield Family?”

Just as the commander took his seat to assume command, the operator revealed the enemies’ affiliation.

“N-no, this crest belongs to Baron Exner!”

For a moment, the commander was confused as to who this Baron Exner was, but he eventually remembered that there was a Baron who was close with the Banfields.

“The upstart Baron!? I thought he seceded from—”

Immediately following this, a white mobile knight appeared and swung its sword down at the bridge of the battleship on which the commander was presiding.

And with that, the commander’s consciousness faded away.

◇

Inside the cockpit of the white mobile knight, Kurt was acting as its pilot and fighting while checking his surrounding.

“Telling us to fight as we enter the planet’s atmosphere—this is crazy.”

The mobile knight which Kurt was riding was state-of-the-art equipment given to him by Liam.

One of the mass-produced models had been specially customized for him, and now it was called the White Knight.

The aircraft had been painted white and was equipped with a type of sword Kurt was skillful with.

Other aircraft followed Kurt’s descent, but they were gray and plain in appearance, making it seem as if they didn’t belong to the same model.

“Strike them before they unleash their mobile knights!”

His subordinates replied in unison to his command.

”Roger that!”

Kurt took a glance at the arcology where small allied ships were making their landing.

Armed men came out one after another from the ships to initiate a ground battle.

“Don’t forget to support the ground forces. We must rescue Baron Gurin at all costs!”

”Yes sir!”

Rescue huh...Kurt let out an inward sigh.

(My subordinates are fighting with their lives on the line. It hurts my conscience to lie to them.)

◇

The ground force that had entered the arcology was being led by Tia.

“Oh Baron~ Where are you~”

Tia was dressed in a pilot suit which also functioned as a power suit.

With a rapier-type weapon in her right hand and a pistol in her left, she shot at enemies whenever one appeared.

Inside her helmet, she smiled with bloodshot eyes.

The enemies set up a barricade as a sign of resistance, but Tia simply kicked the ground and jumped over the barricade.

She landed somewhere with lots of enemies and swung her rapier, decimating them.

The blade of her rapier bent, easily penetrating the enemy’s armor.

Then, she approached a lucky survivor and held him down by placing her foot on his chest, prompting the enemy soldier to let go of his weapons and raise his arms in surrender.

“P-please spare me! I was just following orders!”

“Where’s the Baron?”

The enemy soldier answered her question immediately, feeling threatened by her rapier.

“H-he ran away. We don’t know whether he’s fled or went into hiding, but we were ordered to buy him enough time to escape even if it costs us our lives.”

Tia kicked the enemy soldier and knocked him out. Then, she ordered her men to detain him.

“Tie him up. Also, go check whether any vehicles have escaped through the sky, even small ones.”

The signaller did as ordered, and an answer soon came back.

“All the ships that tried to flee have been detained, but the Baron wasn’t in any of them.”

“Then it must mean he’s hiding somewhere.—We must find him. Lord Liam has demanded that he pay for his sins.”

Tia searched around the mansion with some knights and the ground forces, and soon, a soldier noticed something.

“—Over here.”

What the soldier found was an entrance to a hidden room disguised as an ordinary shelf.

However, there seemed to be some sort of mechanism to open it.

“This might take some time.”

“That so?”

Hearing this, Tia kicked the shelf and forcibly opened up a passage to the hidden room.

In the corner of a luxurious hidden room, Baron Gurin was shivering in terror.

“Hiiii!”

Inside the room, there were countless antiques and piles of rare metals that formed a mountain, all of which were the Baron’s properties.

Tia sheathed her rapier.

Seeing this, Baron Gurin misunderstood the message and let out a sigh of relief.

“Y-you’ve come to rescue me? Phew, thank God. I was worried about what will happen if I got caught by the Calvin Faction.”

“Good for you.”

Tia smiled and threw a punch at Baron Gurin who had stood up and approached her.

The Baron was blown away and crashed into a wall.

Tia walked up to him and grabbed the Baron’s long hair.

Then, she began a dramatic speech.

“Oh, what a shame! We rushed over to rescue the Baron, but we were too late!”

“W-what do you mean you were too late!?”

Knowing that they weren’t there to help, Baron Gurin tried to escape, but he wasn’t able to free himself from Tia’s iron grip.

“There are people awaiting you, people whose planet was ravaged because of an incompetent lord. I’m sure they have a lot of beef with you. It’s the complete opposite with Lord Liam.”

Baron Gurin was then dragged out and thrown in front of the citizens that the ground forces had brought.

They were people who held a grudge against the Baron, and despite the Baron’s attempt to escape, his calf was stabbed before he could do so.

“That hurts! Someone, help!”

The people surrounded him and started attacking with their weapons, which didn’t consist of firearms but rather tools such as swords and spears that once decorated the mansion.

“It hurts, you say!? All because you, we—”

“My family is gone because of you!”

“Reform my ass! Because of what you’ve done—”

The Baron was terrible at politics and management, and the people that suffered under his rule gradually turned him into a pulp.

As a lord, his body had been strengthened, but there was no room for escape with Tia and Liam’s soldiers surrounding him.

Tia, who had been watching this unfold, appeared displeased, and her lieutenant pointed this out to her.

“Is something displeasing you?”

A lord being lynched by his people. This was a taboo in the Empire, and the lieutenant thought Tia was displeased by this, despite it being part of the strategy.

However, Tia was feeling annoyed for a different reason.

“—I wanted to be up there in the sky so that I could deal with Theodore.”

He had tormented her, so Tia wanted to personally end the man.

She was disgruntled that she wasn’t allowed to do so.

Her lieutenant shrugged.

“I’m sure Klaus-dono will wrap things up properly.”

Gerbera

-Near Baron Gurin's home planet-

I'm currently sitting down on my chair, overlooking the battle from space as light flashes by here and there on the battlefield.

Below us, our troops have descended upon the enemies and are defeating the Calvinists left, right, and center.

As for the enemy fleet that was loitering around the planet, we've already turned them into space debris.

The only ships remaining are from those that should have left our camp—in other words, they're allied ships.

We banded together to attack the enemies once they were all nicely gathered in one place, and we're now spectating the battle on the ground.

“Kurt sure seems enthusiastic about this.”

I'm watching Kurt's performance through a monitor, but Theodore, who's been panicking for a while now, demands an answer from me.

“Count Banfield, what's the meaning of this!!”

“What do you mean?”

“It's already clear who won the war! This is foul play!”

Calling it foul play is a bit upsetting, but I'll pretend like I don't know what he's talking about to spite him.

“Is it? Then I must apologize for my transgression.—Having said that, this would surely deal a big blow to the Calvin Faction, ensuring His Highness Cleo the position of Crown Prince.”

Theodore’s face turns bright red as he argues against my logic of “His Highness Cleo has won, so what’s wrong?”

“No one will accept His Highness Cleo as the Crown Prince if he achieves victory through such underhanded means! Count Banfield, I’ll have you take responsibility once we return.”

Agitated, Theodore’s nostrils enlarge, revealing his nose hair.

I turn towards Klaus who’s standing next to me.

Obviously, the act of dismissing him was a ruse.

“Klaus, I’ll apparently be held responsible.”

“—It’s true that we were defeated, at least on record. So there’s no helping it.”

“How cruel. I’ve sacrificed so much to assist His Highness Cleo, and yet he doesn’t approve of my effort. T’is a tragedy. Sniff.”

I direct a grin toward Theodore, but the man himself appears shocked by Klaus’s presence.

“Why is he here!? Didn’t you dismiss him from the battlefield!?”

I reveal the truth to him.

“Oh, that was a lie. After all, I knew that you were sending information to the enemies.”

“W-what!? T-there’s no way that’s true. You’re making things up! To begin with, I don’t have a motive to betray—”

“—That doesn’t matter. You betrayed us, and that’s all I need to know.”

“Have you lost your mind, Banfield!?”

I can’t concentrate on the conversation because of his nose hair.

Even so, to think he’d start calling me without honorifics...

I turn my gaze to Klaus.

“You should say something to him as well.”

“So you’ve noticed, Lord Liam?”

Klaus keeps glancing at Theodore’s nose.

Is he referring to his nose hair?

“That’s right, what do you think we should do with him?”

Perhaps coming to the conclusion that there was no more room for negotiation, Klaus suggests a drastic measure.

“—Getting rid of it would be the most appropriate.”

Well, well, well. Color me surprised.

I thought Klaus would advise me to get rid of him behind the scenes, so I didn’t think he’d make such a suggestion.

“I certainly didn’t expect this from you. Was he bothering you that much?”

“Not really, but—”

Klaus seems to hesitate a little.

Traitors must be disposed of. That must be what he’s thinking.

What a decisive fellow.

He's merciless towards his enemies, but that's what makes him an ideal subordinate.

As one would expect from my Head Knight.

"You're right. I'm glad we're on the same page. Now then, it's time to dispose of some trash."

Eulisia who's been watching from the side hands me my sword.

Realizing the fate that awaits him, Theodore turns around and tries to escape.

"Someone! Stop this mad...man?"

Theodore falls to the ground immediately after.

I've cut off the tendons in his arms and legs.

Standing up from my seat, I approach Theodore and stomp him.

"I'm still miles off from reaching the realm where Master's at, but I'm starting to see his silhouette now."

I'm starting to understand how strong Master was at his peak.

Theodore doesn't seem to understand what's going on, but he becomes cocky once he realizes that I haven't killed him.

He probably thinks I don't have the guts to kill him.

"You think you'll be forgiven after doing this? With this, you've drawn your sword against His Highness Cleo! You better not think this is over!"

Seeing how aggressively he's behaving, I consider toying with him for a bit.

However, I ultimately decide against it as it would dirty the floor of the bridge.

“You seem to be under the wrong impression. I didn’t kill you ’cause it would dirty the bridge. Men, throw him out of the ship.”

“A-are you serious? There’s no turning back for you if you kill me!”

I respond to his threats while still carrying my sword.

“Trust me. We’ve already crossed the Rubicon.”

Theodore seems to understand what I’m saying, but he probably didn’t expect me to go so far. He’s visibly confused.

“Y-you couldn’t be—”

“Take him away.”

Some soldiers drag him away, and I sit back down after returning my sword to Eulisia.

Eulisia pulls a face.

“Did you need a sword in the first place?”

“I can’t unleash an accurate One Flash with my bare hands yet. Cleaning up would become a chore if I shredded him, right? –Anyway, it’s time. Klaus, attack the Personal Guards. Annihilate them.”

Unlike before, Klaus shows signs of reluctance.

Is something bothering him?

“Are we really to attack the Personal Guards?”

There’s no turning back now that we’ve killed Theodore.

I mean, sure, we can come up with an excuse if we really wanted to, and annihilating the Guards here would ruin any chance of reconciliation with Cleo, but so what?

“Teach them who they’ve bared their fangs against.”

“—Understood.”

◇

Klaus was freaking out inside.

(I was talking about his nose hair. How was I supposed to know that he’d be killed!?)

From their conversation, Klaus had thought Liam was going to tell Theodore to get his nose hair treated.

For the time being, Theodore was still considered an ally, so he didn’t think Liam would order his death there and then.

There was also the order to annihilate the Personal Guards.

(This is the worst. Sure, they were the ones to betray us first, but if we do this, we’ll be burning the bridge with His Highness Cleo. No, but—ah, screw this.)

No matter how much he tried, he couldn’t think of an appropriate move in this situation.

After all, the fact that the Personal Guards betrayed them meant Cleo was in on it as well.

(Even if we let them escape, conflict with His Highness Cleo is inevitable.)

Klaus was filled with anxiety thinking about the future, but for now, he decided to carry out Liam’s orders.

◇

Around the same time, the Guide was in the hangar of a battleship that Kurt had destroyed.

He had regained his humanoid form and was trying to rescue No. 3588 who had been buried in a pile of rubble.

“NUOOOO! Not like this! You’re the ace up my sleeve!”

The hangar was in a mess, and sparks were flying everywhere.

It wouldn’t be weird if an explosion occurred at any moment.

Fortunately, the mass-produced replicas of Avid which were named Neo were still safe and sound.

The aircraft dedicated to No. 3588 had been painted red, whereas the ones equipped with artificial intelligence had been painted white.

None of the three had been damaged, but No. 3588 had sustained some injuries.

“Sorry, Mr. Hat. I got hurt.”

Ahaha, No. 3588 laughed powerlessly.

“Don’t worry, you’ll be alright. Liam’s here. I’ll guide you to your plane.”

(For real, why are you getting injured!? Even if you couldn’t beat Liam, I thought you’d be able to at least deliver a heavy blow!)

From the beginning, the Guide didn’t think Calvin and Cleo’s strategy would actually work.

Still, he cooperated thinking he could land a hit on Liam.

In a few months, the girl had grown to the point where she looked like a fifteen-year-old.

However, their secret weapon was now injured, and her performance, diminished.

Her chance would’ve been slim even if she were in optimal condition.

Now, it was all but hopeless.

(Tsk! Can't be helped. I'll have her stall the ground troops while I hit Liam's fleet with the ones equipped with artificial intelligence.)

After thinking of a plan, the Guide conveyed his idea to the girl.

"In your current condition, you wouldn't be able to operate your mobile knight well. Since that's the case, please try to stall the enemies on the ground."

"Stall them?"

"Meanwhile, I'll hit Liam with the knights equipped with artificial intelligence, The longer you stall the ground forces, the more time it will take for the enemies to react to the danger."

"Okay, I'll do that, Mr. Hat."

"Good girl. Now, let's go."

The red Avid replica's eyes glowed when the girl entered the cockpit and sat down.

The other two knights were also activated, and they destroyed the surrounding walls, pushing them away.

"Since it's Mr. Hat's request, I'll make sure it succeeds."

When the red Avid replica soared into the sky from the space created by the other two aircraft, soldiers from the Cleo Faction noticed and bombarded it with attacks.

Beams and missiles flew towards it, but the Red Avid brought the shields mounted on its shoulders to the front.

As a result, the missiles exploded before they could land while the lasers were deflected.

“You two, to the sky!”

The other two Neos sped up and escaped the atmosphere.

After seeing them off, the girl directed her attention at the enemies approaching her.

Based on their conversation, her enemies seemed to be in disarray.

‘Isn’t that Count Banfield’s!?’

‘That’s what the data says.’

‘Did the enemies prepare knights of the same model!?’

To fight in the sky, the mobile knights had been equipped with wings.

They flew around the red Avid on which the girl was in and attacked, but to no avail.

All their attacks either exploded before they reached the target or were deflected.

The red Avid’s performance was similar to the former Avid, and regular bullets simply could not damage its armor.

‘Despite it being a fake, its performance seems to be close to the original.’

Seeing her enemies approach, the girl made the red Avid wield a sword and swing.

“It’s not fake. It has a name. I call her [Gerbera]. Make sure to remember it well.”

Immediately after that, the mobile knights that surrounded her were sliced, leading to subsequent explosions.

“—Or not.”

The girl held her injured flank with her hands and looked up at the sky with a bloodied face.

“I want someone to call me by my name as well.”

◇

A red Avid had appeared. Moreover, it could unleash One-Flash.

Kurt’s squad rushed to the scene after hearing this.

Not only were they nearby, they were told that their allies were being slaughtered one after another.

Once they were near the red Avid, Kurt squinted his eyes.

“It’s been modified, but it’s definitely the same model as Avid. And apparently, it can also unleash One-Flash. What’s going on here?”

Was someone from the same school as Liam in the cockpit?

Kurt decided to warn his comrades from carelessly approaching the enemy.

“Keep a distance and try to attack using ranged weapons! Don’t go near it!”

””R-roger!””

However, when they took some distance, magic circles appeared around the red Avid, and from within emerged muzzles aimed right at them.

Right after, they were showered with live ammunition and optical weapons such as beams and lasers.

While under heavy fire, Kurt clenched his teeth tight.

(They were able to reproduce these features as well!?)

Kurt was thoroughly impressed by the enemies.

Not only was its design similar, its performance was close to the original's as well.

Avid was a mobile knight that Liam had invested a huge budget in. Hence, it wasn't suitable to be mass-produced.

Even preparing just one would be a difficult task, yet there were two more of them.

“So they prepared three and sent the other two toward Liam.”

It was a pity that he couldn't prevent the enemies from heading toward the main fleet, but since their opponents were imitation Avids, there wasn't much he could do.

The red Avid closed in on them, narrowing the distance between them despite their best effort to keep it afar.

“Even its specs are the same!”

Kurt saw the mobile knight of one of his allies get pulverized and decided he must deal with the enemy himself.

Thus, he made his mobile knight draw its sword and slashed at the enemy, only for it to be blocked.

This made him suspect something, and his suspicions were soon confirmed.

“Its skills aren't as refined as Liam's. I can do this!”

The enemy unleashed a One-Flash at him, but as someone who'd known Liam for a long time, Kurt sensed it before it hit him.

“So the pilot's just imitating him.”

He kicked the red Avid away, and by chance, he got to hear the pilot's voice.

Furthermore, the physical contact between them opened up the communication channel, showing him the other party's face.

“T-that face!?”

It's too similar to be a coincidence.

Kurt immediately understood what their enemies had done.

He also noticed that his opponent was injured.

‘It's not a fake! Her name is Gerbera! ’

Kurt was surprised by her voice.

“A girl!?”

‘No. 3588—my mission is to hold you back.’

The red Avid Gerbera tried to forcefully destroy Kurt's aircraft with its power.

However, Kurt had sparred with Liam many times in the past, so he was able to dodge the poorly executed One-Flash.

‘Why won't it hit?’

Feeling sorry for the girl who was puzzled, he answered.

“Your skills with the sword and mobile knight are far worse than Liam's.”

‘You're lying. I remembered them properly! I practiced a ton and got lots of praise!’

Her behavior and attitude suggested that she was much younger than she looked, making Kurt realize what the Calvin Faction has done.

(They touched upon the forbidden in order to defeat Liam.)

Gerbera unleashed one slash after another, but Kurt's mobile knight kept dodging them.

That said, his enemy was covered in rare metal armor, so he couldn't land a decisive blow either.

As such, he kept dragging on the fight to wear down the opponent's pilot.

Eventually, Gerbera's movements became erratic, and it fell from the sky, unable to remain afloat.

By the time Kurt landed near the girl's aircraft, she was crying.

'M-more...I have to work harder...or else...ster Hat...won't praise me.'

She was desperately calling out someone's name.

Kurt who's been watching her closed his eyes.

His allies surrounded Gerbera and pointed their weapons at it, but Kurt held them back.

"Hold."

""But sir!""

"It's pointless. Our weapons can't damage it, and it's not like it can move in this state."

After taking a moment to think, Kurt spoke to the girl.

"If you wish to live, open the hatch."

Fake

We're in the process of annihilating the fleet led by Cleo's Personal Guards.

Suddenly, an operator at the bridge raises his voice, confused.

“Two mobile knights have been spotted leaving the atmosphere! T-their—!”

The general staff officer yells at the startled operator.

“Hurry up with the report!”

“Their signals match that of Avid's!”

“What?”

Everyone at the bridge turns their eyes on me.

I let out a small breath before standing up.

“They must be the mass-produced models that Calvin stole. I'll go retrieve them.”

As I'm doing a light stretch, Eulisia who's by my side tries to stop me.

“P-please wait. There's no need for Lord Liam to personally head out.”

“Nonsense. Those are mine!”

Orichalcum, adamantite, mithril—the mass-produced Avid models have been crafted with various rare metals, and regular opponents won't be their match.

That said, they're very difficult to operate, not to mention their maintenance is no joke.

There's a good reason why the military isn't using them.

If they were cost-effective, the military would've incorporated them into the army by now.

“How clever and thoughtful of Calvin.”

“Eh?”

Eulisia appears surprised that I'm complimenting him.

To set the record straight, I acknowledge Calvin as an enemy.

After all, he has done me in once.

I start to feel a little lonely at the thought of our battle approaching the finish line.

“Get ready to have Avid sortie. I'll test the mass-produced models' specs myself.”

◇

The Cleo Faction had begun to fight amongst themselves near Baron Gurin's home planet.

Marie, who had borrowed a fleet from Liam, was attacking a fleet of 20,000 strong that belonged to Cleo's Personal Guards.

She was taking command at the bridge and mercilessly hunting down the fleeing enemies.

“Destroy them all. Lord Liam wants them annihilated, so we can't let a single soul escape.”

She sat on the seat that belonged to the commander and crossed her legs while staring at the monitors.

Cleo's Personal Guards were in total disarray.

Under the unified attack of the Banfield Family, Cleo's Personal Guards could offer very little resistance and were being defeated one after another.

‘Count Banfield, we’re your allies! We’re His Highness Cleo’s Personal Guards! Cease your attacks at once!’

The image of the commander was projected on the monitor, repeatedly yelling that they were on the same side.

However, when Marie heard this, she smirked and laughed.

“That’s too bad.—If you wish to blame anyone, blame your master.”

‘What do you—‘

There was some noise on the monitor, and before long, the screen went black.

With the flagship defeated, chaos ensued for Cleo's Personal Guards.

Marie's lieutenant watched this unfold and commented lightly.

“With this, there’s no turning back.”

“Not like we have to. They’re the ones that went against Lord Liam first.”

Whatever the reason may be, with Cleo's Personal Guards at the brink of destruction, a wall would be formed between Liam and Cleo.

Marie's lieutenant had also been petrified before and held a grudge against the Empire.

“It’s just like 2,000 years ago. This time, the Banfield Family will probably be given the cold shoulder,” she said.

“If that were to happen again, I’ll choke the life out of the perpetrators. But it probably won’t. After all, the Banfields are about to become the most powerful aristocratic family in the Empire.”

They boasted the Empire’s greatest economic and military power.

Furthermore, Liam was about to receive the title of Duke by marrying Rosetta, a member of the Claudia Family.

Status and honor, Liam would have them all.

He had the skill to back them up as well, and he was gradually becoming someone that even the Emperor could not ignore.

Marie clasped her hands together.

“The rest will depend on Lord Liam’s decisions.”

Even Cleo’s fate would be left to Liam—Marie was showing a carefree attitude, but she straightened her back once she heard a certain report from the operator.

“R-reporting. Lord Liam has set out in Avid. He’ll be taking on the fakes, and we’ve been ordered not to interfere.”

The operator was bewildered, and Marie even more so.

“W-who’s he with!?”

“He said he alone will suffice.”

“—H-he’s like this all the time! I’m sure he’ll be fine. I’m sure he will. But still!”

The commander himself had set out. In other words, they were put in a situation where Liam had to sortie.

Marie stood up and gave her instructions.

“Now that things have come to this, we’ll rush to assist Lord Liam after cleaning up the enemies here with haste. All ships, advance!”

Marie decided to quickly wipe out the enemies in front of them so that they could help Liam if he ever needed it.

◇

Inside Avid’s cockpit, I grasp the control stick, starting up the monitor which displays our surroundings.

The engine roars, but it’s not as fierce as usual.

Rather, I sense a hint of curiosity.

“Are you also intrigued?”

Avid growls in reply, displaying interest toward the fakes, or should I say, its two brothers.

“Let’s quickly go face them then.”

Avid moves around in the hangar pretty much without needing my help and positions itself in the catapult, which has been designed to eject us using magnetic force and magic once permission has been granted.

A small window pops up in the air, and Eulisia, who’s taking charge as an operator, appears.

‘The commander isn’t supposed to head out to the battlefield.’

Eulisia starts complaining, so I correct her misunderstanding.

“Are you dumb? This isn’t a war anymore. I’m just playing around. It’s not like two Avids can destroy a fleet of hundreds of thousands, right?”

Other than my Avid which has been given a Machine Heart, weapons will eventually reach a limit without proper supplies and maintenance.

This is true even for weapons made of rare metals.

Just think of it as a fruitless struggle of the Calvin Faction.

“Everything’s going to be fine. Eject us already. Avid is raring to go.”

‘You speak as if it’s alive. Please show me some love as well.’

“Well, I find Avid much cuter—”

‘Eject.’

“H-hey you!”

Before I could finish saying that Avid is cuter, we get ejected.

The surrounding scenery immediately changes to that of outer space, and Avid activates the thrusters to head toward the fake.

It seems to be in a hurry, much like me.

“Who are the pilots?”

It’s difficult to control Avid, so the enemies might have implemented a system that assists them.

Nevertheless, our opponents this time are like siblings of Avid, which has monstrous performance.

Without a decent level of piloting skills, they won’t be able to move the aircraft properly.

Eager to face off against strong pilots, I look around for enemies, only to have them notice us as well.

Two white Avids are chasing my fleet around.

“Pretending to be allies of justice, are they? Let’s try to establish contact.”

I try to communicate with them, but I don't receive any response.

Instead, the two aircraft start shooting toward us with tremendous speed.

“Huh?”

Feeling that something is off, I frown.

Avid deploys magic circles behind it, intending to test the waters with long-range attacks.

A number of missiles get shot out from the magic circles, but the white Avids respond in kind by deploying their own circles.

The two aircraft intercept Avid's missiles back to back, as if they share the same mind.

I've heard of stories where veteran pilots that have been partners for a long time do incredible moves, but that shouldn't be the case for the ones before us.

Avid attempts to close the distance between us by unleashing its laser blade, but the two aircraft also reveal blades that look like swords.

I quickly seize the control sticks and pilot the aircraft myself, having Avid retreat after perceiving the faintest sign of a slash being fired.

“They can imitate the One-Flash?”

After taking control, I observe the movements of the two aircraft while having Avid fly backward.

There aren't any signs of pilots inside the two Avids, and that's when I come to a certain realization.

“Ahaha! Calvin, I don't dislike that side of you!”

◇

Three trails of light were intricately intertwined in space, with one aircraft fleeing from the other two as they danced around the battlefield.

The Banfield Family's fleet was watching from the sideline, and the Guide was spectating on top of one of the ships, swinging his fist in outer space.

“That's right! Go get 'im! Destroy Liam!”

The white Avids approached Liam.

Though there were some differences in performance level between the original and the imitations, they were the best they could offer for now.

As if responding to his prayers of at least inflicting some artificial injuries on Liam, the white Avids began radiating heat as their armor plates slid past one another.

This was their ace in the hole.

It put a lot of stress on the aircraft, but it provided them with explosive strength.

In other words, it was a double-edged sword.

Calvin wasn't naive enough to think that he'd win by just preparing imitation models of Avid, so he had prepared several trump cards.

The white aircraft approached the original Avid while emitting a pale, flame-like light.

“Blow yourselves up if that's what it takes to bring him down!”

The artificially controlled white Avids threw caution to the wind and concentrated everything on their attack.

Their battle generated a blinding light that covered the area surrounding Avid.

“FUAHAHA! No matter how powerful you are, you’re bound to have suffered some injuries!” the Guide exclaimed.

There was a translucent dog behind the Guide who was ecstatic to have injured Liam.

While maintaining a low posture, it growled at the Guide, not hiding its anger.

Suppressing its urge to jump on the Guide, the dog turned its gaze toward Liam who was fighting.

He was its master, and he had loved the dog dearly.

Unfortunately, his life was made miserable after being spotted by the Guide.

The dog was supposed to pick Liam up after his death in his previous life, but the Guide had intercepted it.

“Fantastic! I’m sure that would’ve done some damage—eh?”

However, something happened that exceeded the dog’s expectations.

Amidst the explosion, a giant made of light had appeared behind Avid.

Its figure was greater than even Avid’s, and it represented the manifestation of Liam’s power.

Both the Guide and the dog could hear Liam laughing inside the cockpit.

‘Not bad! You two will be perfect souvenirs for my junior disciples! I’ll be your master from today. Avid, discipline your younger siblings.’

At Liam’s command, Avid’s eyes glowed red, and it grabbed the white aircraft with each of its hands.

The two aircraft struggled, but against Avid’s power, their struggles were in vain.

“W-what are you doing!” the Guide shouted, attracting the attention of the Light Giant.

“Hiii!?”

He'd be forced to take on Liam's gratitude if he were caught, so the Guide quickly fled while holding his hat.

The dog made a spitting gesture, showing its disgust at the Guide.

Then, it turned toward Liam with an indescribable expression on its face.

Light emerged from the arms of Avid, and it began entering the two aircraft.

Liam was in a good mood.

‘Calvin, you're a man of vision. I'll give you credit for relying on artificial intelligence. However, you'll need more than this to defeat me.’

The two aircraft stopped struggling once they were put under the control of Avid's Machine Heart.

Watching the aircraft that have stopped struggling drift about in space, Liam expressed his gratitude toward Calvin.

‘Thanks, Calvin. I'll consider these my wedding gift!’

It's fine and all to give the captured aircraft to your junior disciples, but can you really call that a wedding gift, the dog wondered.

After all, they would have nothing to do with Rosetta.

The dog began to question its master's attentiveness.

‘Now, it's time to deal with the fun post-war procedures.’

Emperor

Argos, my flagship, has been stationed right above Baron Gurin's home planet, and Viscount Maiat has been summoned to its large conference room.

With no Calvanist aristocrats to support him, he's as tame as a cat.

He's sweating profusely and shrinking in fear before the Cleo Faction.

"Congratulations on your victory, Viscount Maiat. You've won."

I take the initiative to clap, and the other aristocrats eventually follow my lead.

However, Viscount Maiat seems terrified.

No one would see him and think he's won a war.

But I guess this is a natural reaction.

He's won the territories, but this war also served to determine who the next Emperor would be.

Despite emerging victorious in the territorial dispute, the Calvin Faction has lost much of its forces, meaning they can no longer oppose us in the battle for succession.

Viscount Maiat probably knows this as well, which is why he's not too happy about the situation.

"We tried to rescue Baron Gurin, but we couldn't reach him in time, and he unfortunately perished in battle. I have to say, I'm impressed by how

valiantly your soldiers fought.”

I was the cause of Baron Gurin’s death.

More specifically, it was Tia that killed him, but she did it under my orders.

“T-that was your doing,” Viscount Maiat says in a muffled voice.

“Nonsense. We did our best to save Baron Gurin, but we were one step too late. Isn’t that right, Viscount?”

Intimidated, Viscount Maiat nods in agreement.

He’s been put in a spot where he must agree to my words.

If he doesn’t, his family will also be wiped out.

“Well then, let’s deal with the war’s aftermath. Baron Gurin was defeated, and his territory was seized. The head of the family was killed in action, and they don’t have any more territory to speak of. Hence, the Gurin Family will cease to exist from here on out. Is everybody in agreement?”

I ask for everyone’s opinions, and they all nod dismissively, showing little care over the dispute of someone else’s territory.

It’s understandable. After all, such things do not bring them any benefit.

“Rejoice, Viscount Maiat. From today, the home planet of the Gurins is yours.”

“Y-you say that, but I can’t maintain a planet like this. And I refuse to take over Baron Gurin’s debts.”

Based on how desolate Baron Gurin’s planet is, there’s no doubt that its previous owner was deep in the red.

As such, the Viscount is saying that he doesn’t want to take over the planet.

“But you’re the victor here. Don’t think too much about it. After all, the Gurin Family no longer exists, and you were the one that caused its demise, so this is your responsibility, and you can’t refuse it.”

“T-that...”

There’s nobody left to take care of the planet, and since the cause of the Baron’s death lies in Viscount Maiat, the Empire will hold him accountable.

The Viscount’s complexion turns pale.

Seeing this, I set forth my conditions.

“Hand over Planet Charlow. If you do, I’ll take care of Baron Gurin’s home planet, as well as his debt.”

Viscount Maiat jumps at this proposal.

◇

Back in the Capital, Calvin called for Cleo after hearing the details of how the proxy war ended.

“Let me ask you one last question. Was this within your expectations?”

Calvin was genuinely curious and had no intention of voicing any resentment.

In turn, Cleo gave Calvin an honest reply while maintaining a cool expression.

“—No, it wasn’t. I didn’t think he’d annihilate my Personal Guards.”

“—It looks like he knew of your betrayal. What are your plans moving forward? The Banfield Family has solidified its position as the strongest in the Empire. Even if you become Crown Prince and eventually the Emperor, you won’t be able to touch him.”

“He killed my subordinates, and for that, he’ll have to pay the price.”

Calvin ridiculed Cleo after hearing his answer.

“To lose to someone like you...as I thought, my only enemy was Count Banfield.”

“And what do you mean by that?”

Cleo wasn’t pleased by what he was hearing, but Calvin couldn’t care less.

After all, it was decided that his fate would be left to Liam, and no matter what Cleo wanted to do, Liam would get in his way.

“You should’ve just stayed quiet until you became the Emperor. From now on, he’ll treat you as his enemy. If you had lain low and waited for a chance to strike when he least expected it, you might’ve had a chance. Now, however, you might be driven out of your position instead if you aren’t careful. If it’s him, he’ll have no problem dealing with you even while taking care of someone like Cedric.”

Calvin was telling Cleo that he should’ve remained silent if he wished to defeat Liam.

Cleo frowned at his words, but Calvin simply looked up at the ceiling.

“You were too hasty. In fact, I was probably too hasty as well. If I had personally gone and bowed my head to him, my position would’ve remained rock-solid.”

Calvin recalled the manner in which he requested Liam to join his faction.

Never in his wildest dreams did he think things would turn out this way.

Calvin stood up.

“Cleo, Father has summoned you. From today, you’ll be the Crown Prince, the closest existence to the throne. For now, let me congratulate you.”



Lysithea accompanied Cleo as he walked toward the audience hall.

“Cleo, you’ve finally reached a point where you can talk face-to-face with father!”

The Emperor was her father as well, but she had only seen him from afar and had never gotten to speak with him.

Cleo revealed a smile.

“Once I become the Emperor, I’ll introduce you to some noblemen, and you’ll get to pick who you wish to marry.”

Lysithea’s face turned bright red, but she seemed delighted.

“R-really? I’m glad to hear that. I see, I’ll get to marry someone as well. I was ready to stay content with Elder Sister Cecilia’s marriage, but I’d like to get married as well if I had the chance.”

Lysithea was in a great mood now that they weren’t in a situation where they could die at any moment.

Cleo was deep in thought seeing his sister behave like this.

(I’ve finally come this far. Eventually, I’ll ascend the throne and rule this country. Liam, you’ve become a powerful aristocrat, but I’ll soon be Emperor, and when I am, I’ll no longer have to fear you.)

Once they were near the audience hall, only Cleo was allowed to enter.

Alone, he continued onward, and he eventually found himself inside a luxurious audience hall befitting the ruler of the Empire.

Though it was referred to as an audience hall, it was situated outdoors.

There was no need for a roof since they could control the weather.

Under the warm sunlight of the artificial sun, Cleo came face-to-face with His Majesty the Emperor [Bagrada Noah Albarate], and there he felt a

terrible chill.

(W-what? Is he the Emperor?)

Bagrada was sitting on his throne and looked like a kind man in his thirties.

His hair which was long enough to touch his shoulders was tied up in a loose bun, and his body appeared taller and firmer than Cleo's, suggesting that he was a competent knight as well.

At first glance, people would mistake him for a kind man who always smiles, but for some reason, it was offsetting.

“I-it's been a long time, Your Majesty. I have come to answer your summon.”

Cleo quickly lowered his face to avoid Bagrada's gaze.

Cold sweat trickled down his cheeks before falling to the floor.

Bagrada's voice was as gentle as his appearance suggested.

“I hear you've defeated Calvin. I didn't think you'd become Crown Prince, but here we are. Taking into account everything that comes with succession, you should be crowned Emperor in about thirty years.”

Bagrada was giving him his honest thoughts, but Cleo had a lot to say before that.

About how he was appointed as the Third Prince as a joke.

—And about how he wasn't allowed to change his sex.

Indeed, Cleo had been a woman all this time.

He had been living under the guise of being a man simply for Bagrada's entertainment.

People would've noticed this if he had a normal life, but Cleo lived in the inner palace.

He could disguise himself rather easily with a suit, and as the people around him were his relatives, he didn't have to worry about being discovered most of the time.

Now that he was the Crown Prince, he wished to finally resolve his gender issue.

“Your Majesty, I’d like to make a request—”

“Rejected.”

Before he could finish his sentence, Bagrada turned him down.

“You wish to change your sex, correct? But if you go through with it, I’ll disown you.”

“However, being a man would be convenient in many ways, especially now that I have duties I must fulfill as the Crown Prince. Even if it’s for that period of time—”

“No. Your look of disgust and unwillingness pleases me. Now, raise your head so that I can see your beautiful face.”

Cleo obeyed Bagrada’s playful command and raised his head, only to see a beautiful boy smiling at him.

However, for some reason, the smile felt eerie.

Bagrada spoke to him with a smile plastered on his face.

“By the way, you seem to have had a falling out with the Banfield Family that has supported you throughout your journey.”

“—I’m being backed by other aristocrats that will eventually replace him. People have been requesting to meet with me one after another, so I won’t be needing his support anymore.”

“Oh, but that’s not what I’m concerned about. He’s been here several times, but I haven’t had the opportunity to talk with the rumored wonder child until now. Do bring him here when the chance arises.”

What did Bagrada want with Liam?

Cleo was curious, but he judged that it wasn’t the right time to ask.

Although he said it in a gentle manner, Bagrada’s words left little room for refusal.

“I’ll bring him here as soon as he returns to the Capital.”

“I leave it to you, my cute Cleo. I wish to have a nice talk with him. In this bloody war for succession, he has brilliantly managed to climb to the top of the food chain among the aristocrats.”

All the candidates that Cleo had defeated so far, including Calvin and Linus, had been backed by powerful aristocrats with many talented people under their belts, and yet Liam was able to shove them aside and make Cleo the Crown Prince, simultaneously becoming one of the greatest aristocrats in the Empire.

It wasn’t Cleo, but rather the prince that Liam chose, that became the Crown Prince.

Cleo looked down with clenched teeth.

Bagrada saw this and narrowed his eyes into a squint, flashing a nasty smile.

“Do you hate Count Banfield? He’s the man that made you the Crown Prince, yet your face is saying that you hate him more than anyone else in the world.”

Cleo was startled by how spot-on the Emperor was.

“Hate is a strong word. If Your Majesty orders it, I’m sure we can get along without any problem—”

Cleo thought for sure that the Emperor would encourage him to maintain an amicable relationship with the Banfield Family for the future of the Empire, but Bagrada hit him with a curve ball.

“There’s no need for that. In fact, I encourage you to not hold hands with him.”

“—I beg your pardon?” Cleo exclaimed, confused.

Bagrada stood up and praised him.

“You truly are suited to be the Crown Prince of this Empire. You have what it takes to be the next Emperor. I’m very pleased to see that you’re trying to drive away your allies that have given their all to support you.”

“Your Majesty?”

“Keep on entertaining me, my dear child.”

◇

After his audience with the Emperor, Cleo walked unsteadily back to his chamber located in the inner palace.

Lysithea had been worried and accompanied him, but he was now alone on his bed.

Two bumps that could fit in one’s hands appeared when he took off the suit he wore as a disguise.

His body looked smaller than usual due to the feminine curves that stood out.

He raised his right arm in the air and made a grabbing gesture.

The audience with Emperor Bagrada was mentally taxing, but there was hope in his eyes.

“—Liam, you chose the wrong person to become Crown Prince. ”

Soon, Cleo would officially become the Crown Prince.

At the same time, he would become political enemies with Liam.

Though Liam was a tricky opponent to have as an enemy, Cleo was excited at the prospect of fighting him.

“And ‘I’ will be the one to win.”

[TN: Here, Cleo uses the feminine I (watashi) instead of ore.]

◇

The Albarate Dynasty of the Algrand Empire.

Originally, the royal family was made up of the Algrands, but somewhere along the way, the Albarates, which was then a branch family of the royals, seized control through bloodshed.

The Empire has thousands of years of history, and its current Emperor is right before my eyes.

We’ve met several times in the past, but it’s only now that we’re close enough to have a conversation.

This also goes to show how important of a figure I’ve become within the Empire.

For most others, they’ll be allowed to enter the audience hall but not allowed to get this close to the Emperor.

Bagrada applauds me.

“I’m impressed that you managed to defeat Calvin and the powerful aristocrats that supported him. Now, you are the most powerful aristocrat in the Empire both in name and reality.”

“I’m honored.”

Though I'm showing a humble attitude, I'm actually deeply angry at His Majesty, or shall I say, Bagrada?

“You had a quarrel with Cleo, correct?”

He's calling the annihilation of Cleo's Personal Guards a quarrel.

Is that what he thinks of our fight?

“We discovered a traitor among His Highness the Crown Prince's Personal Guards.”

“So that's why. Talk it out with Cleo after this. I hope you can continue to support him in the future.”

Bagrada who's smiling has the appearance of a young man, but I've noticed something.

“My loyalty to the Empire will remain unchanged in the future.”

“With Count Banfield on our side, I'm sure the Empire will be safe. Ah, right. Since you'll be taking the Claudia Family's title, you'll soon be Duke Banfield, is that right?”

“Yes, we'll be getting married immediately after I return to my territory.”

“Oh, congratulations then.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.”

Something ominous is hiding behind Bagrada's smile, something unpleasant and nasty.

I've been thinking about the identity of the “true enemy” that the Guide spoke of, and I've been suspicious of the Emperor all this time.

Now that I'm before him, I'm convinced that he's the one I'm looking for.

After all, there's a dark and sinister aura around him that an ordinary person should not have, an aura that I can sense as I've somewhat approached the level where Master Yasushi is at, and it is telling me that the Emperor of the Algrand Empire is my true enemy.

Clean Slate

[TN: Cleo will be referred to as a “she” when it’s in 3rd person, and a “he” when it’s in 1st person since I don’t think Liam knows that Cleo’s a girl just yet.]

Everyone in the Capital is talking about Cleo and how the unknown Third Prince defeated other promising candidates one after another to become Crown Prince.

With Bagrada leaking to the others around him that he’ll be entrusting the Empire to Cleo, the battle for succession has pretty much come to an end, and it doesn’t seem like any dark horses will be appearing.

Meanwhile, I, Liam Sera Banfield, am gracefully drinking tea with His Highness Cleo, who I’ve successfully pushed to become the Crown Prince.

We’re inside a luxurious mansion specially prepared for the Crown Prince.

Knights have been dispatched by the Empire to protect him, and they’re watching me with vigilance.

The moment I show any strange movements, they’ll no doubt come at me with the intention to kill, disregarding their own lives.

In addition, I can sense the presence of Black Ops. personnel sent by the Empire.

In other words, while it may appear peaceful on the surface, sparks are flying between Cleo and I.

Cleo addresses the elephant in the room.

“Tell me your excuse for annihilating my Personal Guards.”

“Turns out Theodore was a traitor. You should really find yourself more competent subordinates.”

“Leaving aside his competence, he did his best to serve me. How do you think I feel now that I’ve lost such a loyal follower?”

“In exchange, we won in the battle for succession.”

Thanks to what happened this time around, Cleo would become the next Emperor in thirty years.

If I hadn’t dealt with Theodore, we would’ve lost in battles we could’ve won.

Annihilation was certainly going a bit too far, but what’s wrong with wanting to cut down on the enemy’s strength?

“You’re right. Thanks to you, I’m now the Crown Prince. I heard that His Majesty has entrusted Calvin to you. If I may ask, what are you going to do to him?”

Cleo, who’s in a comfortable position, appears curious about how Calvin will be treated.

“He’ll have a taste of living hell.”

“As I thought. Anyway—”

The air around Cleo changes.

His smile vanishes, and he stares at me with narrowed eyes that contain hostility.

“—It’s true that I was able to become the Crown Prince thanks to what happened. Having said that, your right-hand man, the one known as the Undefeated Knight, is too adamant about victory. Competent he may be, but

he's willing to make ruthless decisions if it's to win. Such an attitude goes against what the Empire stands for."

Ruthless? Klaus? Isn't that the ideal subordinate for an evil lord such as I?

"The Undefeated Knight, is it? I'll be sure to inform Klaus of what you said."

Cleo watches as I drink tea, clearly having more to say about the matter.

He cuts to the chase.

"It has also affected my reputation. Thus, I'll need Count Banfield to retire from his position in the faction."

He's telling me to step down from the top, which is a de facto expulsion from the faction.

Cleo's trying to rob me of the faction that I've built.

"Sure."

Not that I care.

Sensing something is off, Cleo tries to probe my intention.

"If you're no longer at the top, you won't be given any important position, you know that right?"

I get up from my seat, annoyed at Cleo's attempt to receive confirmation.

"Do whatever you want. I'll do you a favor and pretend like my contributions don't exist."

"What a shameless thing to say after annihilating my Personal Guards."

"I believe I'm being humble by not requesting a reward."

"—Fine. Our relationship now is that of a clean slate."

I'm not as shameless as you who's trying to cut me off immediately after becoming the Crown Prince.

I turn my back on Cleo and walk away.

“Clean slate? You must mean enemies,” I mutter.

◇

Argos departed from the Capital, and Klaus was summoned by Liam to a room where only important members of the Banfield Family were gathered.

Other than him, “important members” entailed Tia and Marie, the usual two, and Kukuri, who had joined them at the Capital.

The door closed when Klaus entered the room.

The room was strictly guarded and was often used for important meetings that had to remain confidential.

Liam began the meeting as soon as Klaus entered.

“We’re now at odds with Cleo.”

Liam was sitting on a chair as he spoke to the four people lined up in front of him.

None of them were surprised by the news as they had expected it.

Liam looked toward Kukuri.

“We were able to learn of Cleo’s betrayal thanks to Kukuri.”

Kukuri was pleased to have regained his honor.

“One of my subordinates that died left behind a clue, which led me to believe that His Highness Cleo has betrayed us.—Lord Liam, if you so wish, we can assassinate Cleo at any time.”

He was pleased one minute and angry the next.

Betrayal wasn't something he could forgive, and the same went for Marie.

"That runt was able to become the Crown Prince thanks to Lord Liam's support! We should show him who he's turned against!"

Both Kukuri and Marie had a grudge against the Emperor that ruled 2000 years ago, and their means of meting out punishment were rather over the top.

Tia, on the other hand, was a bit more mellow.

"Given the Banfield Family's influence, we should challenge the legitimacy of Cleo being appointed as the Crown Prince. The upper echelon of the Empire cannot ignore Lord Liam's opinion, so we should refuse Cleo's appointment."

After listening to the three's opinions, Klaus agreed to Tia's.

"I second Christina-dono's suggestion."

However, Liam seemed dissatisfied with the four people.

"Are you all stupid? I was the one who promised to make Cleo the Emperor. I can't go back on my words just because he's antagonized me."

Apparently, Liam wasn't keen on getting in Cleo's way, which made Marie upset.

"B-but!"

"Though I've given him support, I've also annihilated his guards, so let's leave it at that."

"B-but that isn't going to convince our enemies! Lord Liam, please reconsider!"

“Enough. I don’t care whether Cleo becomes the Crown Prince or the Emperor. In fact, I’d love to see him become the Emperor.”

He seemed to be having a great time imagining Cleo as the Emperor.

(Lord Liam must be cooking up some plan.)

That was when Liam made a declaration before his four subordinates.

“I’ll make Cleo the last Emperor of the Algrand Empire.”

The four were stunned into silence.

Silence prevailed for a few seconds, only to be broken by Tia’s question.

“What does that—”

“I could almost reach out my hand and grab it.”

“—Pardon?”

“No, let me rephrase. If it’s me, I’m sure I can reach out for the Emperor’s throne. To be honest, I was content with just my territory.—However, I don’t like the current Emperor, and I don’t like Cleo either, so I’ll be defeating them. Don’t you think it’ll be easier if Cleo’s the Emperor?”

As usual, Liam’s idea was to defeat an enemy he did not like, but this time, his enemy was the entire Empire.

He was implying that he would bow out from his country.

With a quivering voice, Marie asked Liam a question.

“Does that mean Lord Liam plans to usurp the Empire?”

She wasn’t trembling out of fear.

Instead, it was out of sheer joy, something Klaus did not share.

(How can you be happy about this!?)

Liam looked up to think.

“Hmm, what should I do? Shall I destroy them from within, or shall I face them head-on?”

To Klaus, it was apparent that Liam was having fun.

(T-this is bad. Any more than this would be seriously bad!)

The Banfield Family will meet its end.

Considering the difference in strength, even a powerful aristocrat stood no chance against the Empire.

If Liam were to lead a rebellion, he would be able to rally allies under his banner, but it was unlikely that they would be able to manage a new country even if they won.

Klaus felt like it was a horrible idea.

However, Tia spoke up in support of Liam.

“That’s a wonderful idea. Lord Liam deserves to rule over a country.”

“Kuhiihihi,” Kukuri cackled. “To think our target would be the Empire.—Lord Liam, please make full use of our clan’s power.”

Marie rejoiced at Liam’s words.

“Lord Liam is the only one that deserves to be the Emperor! If it means destroying the current Empire, this Marie is willing to lay down her life!”

Klaus despaired seeing the fanatical expressions on the vassals’ faces.

(Someone stop them! It’s impossible to fight against the Empire!)

Liam was strong, there was no doubt of that, but that was limited to the scope of aristocrats.

He was far from being strong enough to face the Empire alone.

It might be possible if he gathered allies first, but it would still be a dangerous bet.

Hence, Klaus made up his mind.

(If we were to betray the Empire and lose, we'd be done for. Tragedy would befall our families as well. As a vassal, there are certain things that must be said.)

Klaus raised his voice to object.

“Lord Liam, I disagree with this idea.”

“—What?”

Seeing Liam's narrowed eyes, Klaus continued.

“As I said, I cannot agree with this plan. We can't win against the Emp—”

Before Klaus could finish what he was saying, blades appeared near his neck.

Tia and Marie had pulled out their swords, intending to kill Klaus.

However, Kukuri had protected him at the last moment.

Marie glared at Kukuri.

“You wish to spare the life of someone that disagrees with this plan? Don't get in our way.”

“Kuhiihihi, unfortunately, I have a rather intimate relationship with Klaus-dono. Besides, Lord Liam wishes to hear what Klaus-dono has to say.”

Tia and Marie turned toward Liam and found him looking exasperated.

“Klaus, speak.”

The girls withdrew their blades as Liam appeared to be interested in Klaus’s opinion.

Klaus had made up his mind.

True to his promise, Kukuri had protected him from the girls’ attacks, but he was probably on their side when it came to Liam’s plan.

If Liam ordered Klaus to be killed, Kukuri would bring down his knife without hesitation.

(But if I don’t say it, nobody would.)

Klaus was serious in trying to dissuade Liam from his plans.

They could still turn back now.

“It’s clear which side is stronger between the Banfield Family and the Empire.”

“Right. If the Empire were to throw everything at me, I wouldn’t stand a chance.”

Liam knew well that the Empire was surrounded by enemies and that it couldn’t throw everything at him.

However...

“Even if the troops at the border couldn’t be moved, the Banfields still won’t be able to compete with the Empire.”

“Won’t there be people siding with me?”

There were quite a lot of aristocrats dissatisfied with the Empire.

Liam had gathered such individuals to the Cleo Faction.

If he were to rise up in rebellion, he knew that he'd have their support.

“If we request help in defeating the Empire, they’ll ask to be rewarded. The best way to do this is to win with the strength of the Banfield Family alone.”

(The troubling thing is that we actually have a small chance of winning.)

Considering the strength of the Banfield family, the possibility was not zero, and as long as there was hope, the others around them would not give up.

If he were to claim that they had no chance at all, they would question the validity of his claims.

He didn’t have time for that.

After all, the person he had to persuade was Liam and Liam alone.

As such, Klaus explained how they wouldn’t have a bright future even if they won.

If Liam were to win with the support of other countries and aristocrats, he’d have to listen to their requests later on, and in the worst-case scenario, the Empire would be swallowed up by neighboring countries amidst the confusion.

He wished to convince his audience that problems could arise after they won as well.

However...

“I get what you mean. Then how many troops would you say is ideal?”

When asked for a rough estimate, Klaus replied after a moment of thinking.

“In terms of number, we’d need a million ships, and to move a million ships without any problem, we’d have to be able to maintain four times that number, or four million ships. Furthermore, we’d need enough territory to house such an army.”

A functioning fleet required three things: vacations, training, and military exercises.

Without these three components, they wouldn’t be able to withstand actual battles.

In other words, to have a million troops deployable at all times, they’d require four times that number.

If a million troops were all they had and they won after pushing themselves to the limit, they’d be left in a hopeless situation afterward.

It would be the worst-case scenario if they defeated the Empire but couldn’t do anything after that.

(Given such an absurd number, I’m sure they’ll realize it’s impossible.)

Liam listened to Klaus’s opinion and took it seriously, nodding several times.

“4 million? As things stand, that wouldn’t be possible.”

Klaus was relieved to hear that.

(Phew. He could be reasoned with after all.)

However, Liam stood up and applauded him the next moment, impressed by his foresight.

“As expected of Klaus, the Undefeated Knight. I’ll take that into account.”

“—Pardon?”

(Undefeated Knight? And what do you mean you'll "take that into account"!? I disagreed with his plan, which means he won't go through with it anymore, right!? Right!?)

—But Klaus's expectations were betrayed.

"4 million. It's a ridiculous number, but if we can achieve it, victory will be ours. Since the Undefeated Knight is saying it, it must be true."

"Lord Liam? What's this about an Undefeated Knight?"

"Hmm? Oh, it's a nickname that the Capital has come up with for you. You're lucky to have such a cool nickname. I'm still stuck with being the Pirate Hunter. Wanna exchange?"

Liam was jealous of Klaus, but the latter wasn't happy about this at all.

(I'm responsible for miscellaneous tasks! Where did this Undefeated Knight come from!?)

Liam looked at Klaus and the others.

"I'll be staying cooped up inside the territory for a while to focus on amassing enough power to go against the Empire."

"Understood!"

Tia and the others knelt and replies in the affirmative.

Liam once again made his declaration.

"Our next target is the Empire. I'll be taking this seriously, and you guys should as well."

Then, he chuckled.

"With a million troops, we should be able to fight the Empire head-on."

"—Huh?"

(You're kidding, right!? Isn't it obvious that it's better to destroy it from within!? Is he really thinking of going to war with the Empire!?)

In trying to dissuade Liam from fighting the Empire, Klaus had inadvertently raised the difficulty to hard mode.

He felt like holding his head.

The Evil Lord's Present

So it's been decided that we'll be fighting the Empire in the future.

That's good and all, but there's a bigger problem ahead of me, a problem that's more annoying than my beef with the Empire.

“So...there's something I'd like to consult with you guys about.”

We've just set our eyes on the Empire, and everyone seems to be basking in the glow of the excitement.

That is, except Klaus, who's as calm as always.

As expected of my right-hand man.

Tia immediately reacts to my words.

“Is something bothering you, Lord Liam? What is it about?”

Up until this point, I've just been going with the flow, thinking “the Emperor's my true enemy, so why I don't take over his Empire?”

I was rather surprised when Klaus gave me a concrete number, but it helped make the plan more realistic.

Good job, Klaus.

Having said that, even for someone like me who likes to make important decisions on the fly, there are certain issues that give me headaches.

“—It's about Rosetta.”

“Hah?”

“I said, it’s about Rosetta! I got my hands on Charlow, so I was thinking I’d give it to her as a present. What do you think?”

More than a century has passed since I came to this world.

Now, I have a rough understanding of how things are valued, and I can’t help but wonder whether I’ve been too frugal.

Thus I’ve arrived at a certain thought:

—If I were to gift her Charlow, wouldn’t it be considered a luxury even by this world’s standard?

“Giving her a planet as a gift. Quite a luxury, don’t you think?”

Tia shows a strained smile after hearing my plan.

“T—that’s a wonderful idea, Lord Liam. Gifting Lady Rosetta a planet! Truly something only Lord Liam could do!”

—No matter how you look at it, she’s not being sincere.

She’s always praised me from the bottom of her heart, saying “As expected of Lord Liam!” at everything I did.

However, she’s stuttering now, and her eyes are swimming about.

I turn toward Marie, but she looks away as I do so.

“It’s a wonderful idea that the likes of us would never have thought of! H-however, it deviates a little from common sense.”

After being questioned by Marie about my common sense, I turn to Kukuri for answers.

He doesn’t avert his gaze, but tries to explain the flaws in my idea in a roundabout way.

“I believe it’s a brilliant gift that only Lord Liam could prepare. However, once you’re the owner of a planet, you’d naturally be obligated to take care of it. If left unattended, pirates could set up base there, and Lady Rosetta would be held accountable.”

“I-is that so.—And Klaus?”

I turn my attention to Klaus, my last hope, but he’s blanking out for some reason and doesn’t seem to have heard our conversation.

“You there?”

“Ah, um, well.”

That confirms it.

Apparently, I still don’t understand how things are valued in this world.

Gifting a planet might be overkill.

“—Alright, alright. I’ll manage both Charlow and Baron Gurin’s home planet. Aight, cool. Then what should I do about Rosetta’s gift?”

“Everything necessary for the wedding has already been prepared,” Marie points out.

“Well, it would just be a normal gift.”

“A planet for a normal gift?”

All four of my subordinates give me looks that say “he’s too far gone”.

I’m the Master here!

“Forget it. I’m going to sleep!”

Klaus receives a call just as I’m about to drive them out of the room.

Kurt’s name comes out.

“Lord Liam, it’s an urgent call from Lord Kurt.”

“Kurt?”

◇

‘—Sorry, Liam. I can’t break off my marriage with Her Highness Cecilia.’

“I had a feeling that would be the case. Don’t worry about it.”

Kurt has contacted me in a hurry because of his relationship with Her Highness Cecilia, his fiance.

As siblings born from the same mother, Cecilia has a particularly stronger connection to Cleo.

With Cleo and I becoming enemies, Kurt has been caught in an awkward position.

“You’ll side with me, yes?”

‘—Yeah...’

From the other side of the monitor, I can see Kurt’s sunken expression.

For a moment, I worry that he’ll choose the Empire over me, and that’s when he makes a suggestion.

‘Liam, I have a request. You know about your clone, right?’

“I’ve heard about it in the report. According to Calvin, it’s a plan Cleo thought of. It doesn’t really matter who it was that came up with the plan, but they should’ve known better than to teach my clone One-Flash.”

‘What’s going to happen to her?’

“Her One-Flash is a mere imitation, nothing to be afraid of—that said, I have no need for a clone.”

Kurt makes a sad expression.

‘I’d like to ask a favor. Can you entrust her to me?’

“What do you mean?”

Why would Kurt want my clone?

Sure, she’s competent enough to ride the knockoff Avid, and she’s said to be quite a skillful knight, but at the end of the day, she’s just a kid on the inside.

She’s not easy to work with either, so there’s no benefit to keeping her.

However, Kurt seems to pity her.

‘She was created just to fight. As you pointed out, she’ll be disposed of if no one takes care of her. That’s just too cruel.’

“Is she the only one deserving of your pity? This world is overflowing with people that need help but have nowhere to get it from.”

Kurt chokes at my words.

—Indeed, and I was one such person in my previous life.

No one extended their help to me.

That’s why I feel slightly jealous that Kurt is showing such care to my clone.

“Bah, whatever. Do whatever you want with it. But I’ll be taking the aircraft.—Amagi’s come to know about them. If I don’t bring them back, I’ll be in for a scolding.”

I had the Seventh Weapons Factory build mass-produced models of Avid so that I can one day give it to Ellen, my disciple.

This was done in secret, yet the plan was exposed thanks to Calvin.

When I’m back in my territory, Amagi will no doubt scold me again.

Honestly, it weighs on my mind just as much as the matter of my marriage.

‘Of course, but are you really fine with that?’

“You and I are friends, and I intend to keep it that way.”

I don’t know what he likes about my clone, but if it’s all it takes to maintain a friendly relationship with Kurt, it’s a cheap price to pay.

‘Of course, we’ll always be friends. Even if you didn’t agree to my request, I wouldn’t have cut off ties with you.’

“I see.”

With this, the Exner Family would probably side with me when I rebel.

But there’s nothing absolute in this world, so I should continue to foster a good relationship with the Exner Family in the future.

‘Anyway, I was really surprised to hear that you’ve been making preparations for the wedding all this time. I see, so you were adamant about ending the war in two years because of your marriage.’

Brightening up, Kurt suddenly pokes fun at me.

“I-I just didn’t want to make changes to my schedule! I’m cutting the call, alright? Make sure you attend the ceremony.”

‘Of course I will.’

I cut the call and give a deep sigh.

“—It wasn’t for Rosetta.”

Who am I trying to convince here...

◇

Flagship Argos enters the atmosphere of the Banfield’s home planet.

A large number of people have gathered at the port to welcome my return, and texts congratulating my safe voyage are being projected in the air.

A red carpet has been prepared for me, and with the floor being a moving walkway, I could travel at a considerable speed.

It would be faster to just ride a vehicle, but I need to show my citizens that I'm safe and sound.

The passageway is surrounded by glass, and the transparency allows people to see me from all sides.

They look as pathetic and pitiful as ever, rejoicing over the return of their lord.

Before my might, they have no choice but to bow.

It really goes to show how unfair the world is.

As I'm passing through an aisle with a fierce grin on my face—

“Darling!”

“No!”

—Rosetta jumps on me.

I've been projecting the aura of an evil lord until now, but everything's been ruined because of her hug.

The guards around me show bitter smiles seeing Rosetta hugging me and rejoicing.

Marie, on the other hand, seems happy about the result.

“Lady Rosetta, that's unbecoming of a lady,” Tia says as she looks around.

“Though it shouldn't really matter since everyone here's an insider.”

While hugging and crying, Rosetta tells us how happy she is to see me return in one piece.

“I’m glad that Darling’s safe. I heard we were at a disadvantage and got really scared.”

“You thought I’d lose? That would never happen.”

“I didn’t, but just imagining Darling gone made me—”

After all, I have the blessing of the Guide.

If I were to lose against Calvin, I wouldn’t stand a chance against my true enemy, Bagrada.

However, there’s something on my mind.

When the Guide informed me about the existence of my true enemy, he appeared rather impatient.

It seems Bagrada has also stepped outside the boundaries set for humans.

One-Flash was created for the sake of battling those that have stepped into the beyond, so I should be fine, but I should train just in case.

—Thirty years.

I must be strong enough to fight the Empire by then.

“You worried over nothing. Anyway—we don’t have much spare time.”

Amagi and Brian who have been trying not to disrupt us step forward.

“We’re ready to conduct the ceremony. Luckily, all that preparation didn’t go to waste. You must be glad, Master.”

“Lord Liam, this Brian is moved! To think you were making preparations for the wedding!”

—Surprised by the revelation, the people around me start buzzing.

“Oh, so it was for this!”

Silence, fools!

Don’t you guys dare make fun of me!

They eventually shut up, but then Wallace enters the scene looking all proud of his accomplishment.

He bounces his bangs with his hand.

How infuriating.

“Before he left, he told me to just go ahead with the preparations. We’ve prepared a grand wedding for you, Liam!”

Wallace gives me a thumbs up, making the people around us look at me with warm smiles.

My image, destroyed!

I’ve worked tirelessly over the years to build up the image of an evil lord, yet now I look like a man who worked hard for his lover.

Such evaluation of me is unacceptable.

“It wasn’t for Rosetta. It was for me! Now get to it!”

When I yell at them, everyone responds in unison with knightly salutes

“““Yes, sir!”””

Seeing them all move as one somehow irritates me even more.

Their eyes when they look at their Master don’t contain awe, but rather fondness.

Absolutely unforgivable.

Duke Banfield

On the day of the wedding...

When it comes to aristocratic weddings, they're mostly conducted to showcase others rather than to create personal memories.

It's essentially a ceremony to show people that the Banfield Family will be taking over the title of Duke from the Claudia Family.

Rosetta and I are waiting for our turn in our wedding dress and suit.

We've limited the guests to aristocrats of the same faction that fought on our side during the war and those directed related to the Banfield Family.

Originally, I was planning on inviting more people, but now that I can't afford to play around, I need to consider who I build close ties with.

I no longer have the leeway to entertain those that are aiming for my wealth.

Having said that, including my previous life, this is my second time marrying.

“You look rather nervous, Rosetta.”

“Darling, why don't you come sit over here?”

“I'm more comfortable like this.”

I was thinking of teasing Rosetta who seems nervous, but for some reason, she's looking out for me.

In fact, that applies to everyone around me.

Even Marie has left Rosetta's side and come over to me.

"Lord Liam, you just have to behave as you normally do."

"This is how I normally behave."

"I-Is that so? Lord Liam seemed restless, so we were getting worried."

-I was just planning on teasing Rosetta a bit. Why am I getting nervous?

I think back to my previous life.

I remember paying attention to my ex-wife, praising her for how beautiful she looked. Now that I think about it, it was all in vain.

That's why I won't be saying anything of the sort to Rosetta.

"Darling."

"What is it?"

"Darling looks dashing in that suit."

"This? Well, I had Thomas prepare it using a huge sum of money. It's just a one-time thing, but he's even prepared a spare. Excessive, isn't it?"

My suit is emitting a pale, natural glow, and since it's made of mithril that has supposedly received divine blessing, it can apparently behave like a lucky charm or something.

-Personally, I wanted something more gold and shiny, but Amagi said, "-Please match Lady Rosetta's dress," so that was that.

Rosetta compliments my appearance.

"It's not excessive at all. It fits Darling perfectly. I'm starting to worry that I can't match up to you."

—What's this? Could she be looking out for me?

Rosetta looks somewhat down, so I decide to say something for the time being.

“T—that's not true. We should match pretty well. Right, Marie!?”

“Eh? Oh, yes.”

Marie appears somewhat disgruntled.

‘Why are you bringing me into this!?’ Her expression seems to say.

—How dare she look at me like that.

Just as I'm about to knock some sense into her, the door swings open, and in comes Amagi.

“Lord Liam, it's time.”

“Okay.”

Since I'll be entering the wedding hall first, I exit the waiting room and leave Rosetta behind.

◇

Rosetta giggled after Liam left.

“Is something the matter?” Marie asked, curious.

“I didn't expect Darling to be so nervous. I just found it funny how watching him calmed me down,” Rosetta explained, thinking back to how Liam was behaving.

Marie nodded in agreement. She had been surprised by his behavior as well.

“Lord Liam's the type to be calm and collected even on the battlefield. Seeing this side of him is a privilege reserved only for Lady Rosetta.”

“That’s not true. In fact—”

◇

After leaving the waiting room, I’m walking down the corridor with Amagi following me close behind.

It’s a daily occurrence, but something feels different today.

“I’ll be a Duke after this marriage. Amagi, I’ve achieved so much in a hundred years. –It’s thanks to you.”

Of course, I had the help of the Guide as well, but Amagi has always been there to support me, so it’s a given that I thank her for that.

Amagi replies with a blank expression.

“I merely provided support for Master.”

“But it’s thanks to that that I was able to climb so high. I couldn’t have done it without you.”

When I was handed a desolate territory, I really didn’t know what to do with it, but thanks to Amagi, I was able to manage the territory without much problem.

I had to face many difficulties along the way, and I’m just glad I wasn’t alone.

“I’ll continue to count on you from now on, so make sure you stay by my side.”

Amagi’s important to me, and that will never change.

Hearing my words, I detect a slight fluctuation in Amagi’s voice, so trivial in fact, that anyone other than me wouldn’t have detected it.

She sounds somewhat sad.

“Master no longer needs my support to run the territory. After all, Master is now better than I am when it comes to handling affairs related to the territory.”

“Well, I’ve been a lord for a long time now.”

I’ve already been a lord for around a hundred years, so one could say that I’m pretty experienced.

“Others can replace me in the work that I do. Master should rely more on Lady Rosetta in the future.”

“Others can replace you in your work, sure, but no one can replace you. So stay by my side. I’ve said this before as well, haven’t I?”

I turn back and catch sight of Amagi who looks a little happy, a small smile on her face.

“I will serve Master for as long as I am able to.”

It’s the same answer as before.

What bothers me is the phrase “as long as I am able to”.

Is she insinuating that I’ll change my mind in the future?

“You think I’ll behave coldly to you?”

“There aren’t any absolutes in this world, so one cannot guarantee anything that has yet to happen.”

Her response befits an AI’s. It’s been so long since she’s behaved like this, and I laugh as a result.

“You’re right, but don’t worry. We’ll always be together.”

“—Yes.”



The Guide was overlooking the Banfield Family's home planet, looking as if he had swallowed a bitter pill.

“Don’t think this is over, Liam!”

He was watching Liam’s wedding with Rosetta from outer space.

“Despite what he claims, that bastard’s feeling quite happy about this. What happened to your distrust of women!?”

Though Liam was complaining about various things, by looking into his heart, the Guide knew that he was feeling rather pleased with everything that was happening.

The Guide wanted Liam to continue being distrustful toward women, so this wasn’t good news to him.

Hence, he decided to mess things up a bit.

“Let’s throw all the negative emotions I’ve collected on the battlefield at him! It’ll only serve as a minor disturbance, but I refuse to let everything end peacefully!”

The Guide had recovered a bit after absorbing the negative emotions that arose from the proxy war, but now that Liam had taken a step beyond the human realm, his revenge would only amount to mischief, not to mention he’d lose most of the power he regained.

Having said that, the Guide couldn’t bear to watch Liam happy.

Holding himself back and conserving his power would’ve been the wiser choice, but he let anger get the better of him.

“Liam, I’ll embarrass you in front of the crowd!”

A black mist emerged from the Guide’s body and was about to fall on top of the Banfield Family’s wedding venue where Liam and Rosetta were about to kiss.

“As if I’ll let things end like this! –Hmm?”

However, the mithril suit and dress that the two were wearing responded to the Guide’s curse and shone more brilliantly than before.

Said to be capable of repelling all evil, the true silver protected their wearers from the Guide’s attack and even returned the curse in full.

The mist was thus shaken off by the mithril, and as it shone brilliantly under the blessing of those living in the territory and many others, Liam’s power rose even further.

The next thing he knew, a silver sword that emitted holy powers appeared before the Guide, its tip pointed right at his head.

It was heading straight at him at the speed of light and before he could even curse, the silver sword was right before his eyes.

It pierced his head, destroying his body completely.

“GYAAAAAA!! MY BODY!!”

With his body destroyed, the Guide, now back in his hat-only form, bolted.

“I’ll remember this, Liam!!”

In the end, things would’ve been better for him if he hadn’t interfered at all.

◇

The wedding’s over now, and my main vassals including Klaus have gathered around me in praise.

It must be tough being an employee.

Not only have they been forced to attend the wedding, they have to praise me like this as well.

“Lord Liam, I’d like to offer sincere congratulations from all the vassals present.”

Klaus seems to be representing them, but I’ve heard enough of this already.

Including letters and mails, the congratulatory messages I received number in the hundreds of millions.

“It’s just a wedding, big deal.”

Annoyed, I loosen the collar around my neck and plop myself on a chair, deciding this is a good chance to discuss with them about what to do moving forward.

“More importantly, we can’t have as many flashy ceremonies from now on.”

I’ll be investing as much as I can into the development of my territory, so I plan on keeping ceremonies to the bare minimum.

Tia takes a step forward.

“Regarding that, I have a suggestion, Lord Liam. If Lord Liam plans to be frugal, why not lower our salaries as well? We don’t wish to see Lord Liam bear the burden alone.”

“Ang?”

My mood turns for the worse.

Noticing this change, Marie steps forward to replace Tia.

“Our knights are treated considerably better compared to knights of other families. However, since that is putting pressure on our finances, we thought it’d be better to—”

So they’re willing to get a pay cut since I’m trying to be frugal?

How touching!

—or so you'd think, but I have no faith in people.

“Did you hit your head somewhere? If I do that, there'd be an outflow of talent to other families. Why would I risk that?”

“But—”

“I expect people to work as much as they're paid. No more, no less.”

I don't believe in human nature.

What's important is the will, not the money? Bullshit.

That would be an ideal situation for the employer, but all the skilled employees will leave to find better working conditions, and as a result, only the incapable will be left.

Screw loyalty.

With Tia and Marie feeling disheartened, Klaus carefully talks to me.

“Let's put this matter aside. Lord Liam, shouldn't you head back?”

“Why?”

“Lady Rosetta must be waiting for you, so it's time Lord Liam returns.”

I correct my posture after hearing this from Klaus.

“B-but I mean, you guys have much more to tell me, right? I'm here to listen.”

Kukuri bows deeply.

“It's the newlywed's first night, an important occasion for the family. By all means, please spend more time with Lady Rosetta, and Lord Liam may rest assured, for we will protect you.”

“So you plan on peeking!?”

Hearing me shout at Kukuri, Tia suggests something insane.

“Lord Liam, are you perhaps worried? If so, this Christina is willing to be Lord Liam’s practice partner.”

Marie joins in after Tia.

“Scram, minced woman! Lord Liam, please use this Marie for practice. My body is pure and has no strange illnesses.”

“And what do you mean by that!”

Seeing them start a fight, I direct a cold glare at them.

“Shut it, you two.”

The two fall silent, and Klaus counsels me on the subject matter.

“Lord Liam, I’m sure Lady Rosetta is anxious about this as well.”

“But I’m not.”

“In that case, please help soothe Lady Rosetta’s anxiety.”

“A-alright.—I guess it’s time for me to go then.”

The four give me encouraging words as I get up from my chair.

“Lord Liam, please do your best. Christina here will be praying for your success tonight!”

“Oh, how wonderful tonight will be. Lord Liam and Lady Rosetta will be consummating their marriage! Marie here is so happy she’s about to cry.”

“Please rest assured. I will have Kunai lead some female members of our clan to fortify the room’s defense.”

“This is an important event for the household.”

—Are these guys here to make fun of me?

“Shut. Your. Mouths.”

◇

I enter our bedroom where I find Rosetta waiting tensely for me.

“Darling! U-um, how’s this?”

“O-ou.”

Rosetta’s wearing a sensual dress and posing sexily on a large bed.

Where did she learn this from?

Anyway, she doesn’t seem comfortable with this either.

I climb to bed and sit down in front of Rosetta, for some reason in a seiza.

Rosetta does the same, mirroring me.

—What exactly is going on here?

Whatever, I should explain to Rosetta about several things.

“Rosetta.”

“Y-yes!”

“I’m sorry, but due to various circumstances, we’ll have to lead simple lives for a while.”

“Okay!—Wait, huh?”

“You might not be happy with this, but it’s already decided. If you were dreaming of living a luxurious life after our marriage, I’m sorry to say that that won’t be happening.”

In order to fight against the Empire, I'll be putting my all in developing my territory.

I won't be going easy like before.

For our future, I'll be going all out this time.

Rosetta nods after thinking for a while.

"Y-yeah, we shouldn't be too extravagant."

"Glad you understand."

It's good that Rosetta's accepting this well, but time continues to pass as we face each other.

"Um, Darling? Was that something we had to talk about now?"

"No, not at all."

Now that I think about it, it isn't the right time or place to talk about this.

Rosetta laughs.

"W-what's so funny!"

"I didn't think Darling would be nervous as well."

"I'm not!"

"Oh, is that so? Then is Darling used to this?"

"Of course! I've already—with various—women—various....."

"Darling?"

—A hundred years have passed since I reincarnated into this world, but Amagi's the only woman I've been with.

The reality hits me like a truck.

“What have I doing for the past 100 years?”

I was supposed to be an evil lord that have women waiting on me, but by the time I realized, all the women around me were unfortunate people.

To think Rosetta would be my second woman.

“It wasn’t supposed to be like this...”

“Don’t cry, Darling! Here, I’ll comfort you!”

Rosetta hugs me as the realization dawns on me that one of my goals had never been achieved.

In the future, I’ll behave more like an evil lord.

But for now, I have Rosetta to deal with.

“Right! Rosetta, I’ll be holding you!”

“—Yes.”

With her cheeks dyed red, she smiles.

—Seeing this, I couldn’t help but think she’s a little cute.

Epilogue

Calvin, who'd been handed over to Liam, was sent to one of the pioneer planets owned by the Banfields.

The living environment there was not great, especially considering his past identity which was that of the Empire's Crown Prince.

However, he was destined never to step outside the pioneer planet.

“Mr. Calvin, we’re done for the day.”

“Already?”

“Yes, you’ve really been putting your mind into this.”

He checked the time while getting off a heavy machinery.

It was past five in the afternoon.

Other than the heavy machinery lined up around them, there was nothing in the area as it was still under development.

A man younger than Calvin asked what he was planning to do for the rest of the day.

“Going straight home?”

Wiping off his sweat, Calvin nodded, feeling a bit shy.

His hair which was once long had been cut short, his beard was shaved, and his skin was getting tanned.

“My kids nag me every day to play with them. Since we have a day off tomorrow, I’m planning on taking them out to the amusement park, and I won’t last unless I rest my body today.”

“You must care for your family a lot.”

“Until recently, I’ve been neglecting them, so I’m trying to make it up for that.”

“The family-oriented Mr. Calvin neglecting his family?”

“Well, there was a lot going on in my life at the time.”

When Calvin was handed to the Banfield Family, most of his wives demanded a divorce.

After all, they didn’t know what life awaited them at the Banfield’s, and they didn’t wish to suffer.

However, there was one woman who followed him there with her children.

She was originally a commoner who Calvin had fallen in love with, and she had insisted to come with him along with their children.

At first, Calvin had refused for fear of what awaited him at the Banfield Family, but she claimed to have nowhere else to go anyway and stood her ground, believing it best for the family to stick together.

Calvin felt powerless but wept tears of joy when he heard this, so he made his family his priority and spent his time with them whenever he could.

“Is Mr. Calvin not joining us in a round of drinks?”

“His stories are interesting. It’s a shame he couldn’t join us.”

“Yeah, he gives off a special vibe, not to mention he’s skilled in various things. Rumors say he’s a big shot in the aristocratic community.”

“Psh, why would someone like that be here on a pioneer planet?”

“It’s not as uncommon as you might think. Many powerful aristocrats go into hiding for various reasons. Maybe he got tired of the aristocratic society and escaped here.”

“Soooo...our colleague’s an aristocrat.”

“They’re all just rumors though.”

The citizens of the Banfields Family were oblivious to the fact that they were working with the former Crown Prince of the Empire.

◇

Calvin returned home after buying some gifts along the way.

His new house was tiny compared to the palace he used to live in. In fact, it was smaller than his former room.

At the front door, he was greeted by his wife who had come out from the kitchen.

“Welcome back. Dinner’s ready.”

“Smells delicious.”

Upon entering the house, his children jumped at him.

“Dad, where’re the gifts?”

“Now now, I’m still dirty from work, so you can hug me later. I bought donuts today.”

“Yay~”

His children took the box of donuts and ran to the living room gleefully.

Calvin felt guilty seeing this.

(I wonder how my ex-wives and children are faring in the Capital...)

While feeling worried for his ex-family members that weren't there with them, he spoke to his wife.

"Did anything happen today?"

His question was vague, but his wife knew what he wanted to ask.

"Around noon, investigators from the Banfield Family came over to speak with us."

"Did they mention what'll happen to us in the future?"

"No, they didn't bring up anything in particular."

Calvin and his family had been entrusted to the Banfield Family, but they were living their lives like ordinary citizens.

Having received a high level of education, he had no problem finding a job, and he had quite a lot of free time as well.

They couldn't live lavishly, but in a sense, they were living an ideal life.

Back in the palace, he had to request permission whenever he wanted to do something, and he had to pay attention to how those around him reacted to his decision.

However, things were different here.

Though he couldn't afford any luxuries, Calvin honestly found it liberating.

That was why he couldn't help but feel anxious.

"Hmm, aren't things supposed to be more...tough?"

"Maybe Duke Banfield thought it was a sufficient enough punishment for the former Crown Prince to live like an ordinary citizen."

For some reason, he felt his wife was right.

When they had been enemies, he noticed Liam was a man of spotless integrity, and as ironic as it may have seemed, a certain part of him trusted Liam.

“I thought things would be much worse than this. I mean, there’s a lot to be done, but honestly speaking, I like things better here.”

“Really?”

“Yes. I don’t have to worry about matters of succession or anything of that nature now. If I knew this would happen, I would’ve surrendered earlier.”

Overall, he was glad he didn’t have to shoulder the Empire anymore.

Thus, under the supervision of the Banfield Family, Calvin and his family enjoyed a normal life.

◇

At the territory of Baron Exner...

Having received lots of support from the Banfield Family, the planet had undergone massive development and looked nothing like it did in the past.

However, the Baron continued to live in the same mansion as before.

Unlike Liam, he lived a simple and modest life without preparing a new mansion.

Kurt didn’t think much of this either and was taking a walk in the courtyard of the mansion with two other people.

In front of Kurt and his companion, No. 3588 was twirling in a one-piece.

Kurt called her name.

“Lily, don’t go too far by yourself.”

“Okay~”

Although she seemed like an adult, [Lily] behaved like a child.

She didn't mind getting mud on her as she played.

Cecilia, Kurt's fiancé, was watching over her with Kurt next to her.

With their marriage around the corner, she was being taken care of by the Exner Family.

She was a calm woman and watched Lily as she played with warm eyes.

“Ara ara, Lily's a real tomboy. She reminds me of Lysithea when she was young.”

Kurt smiled apologetically at Cecilia.

“I'm sorry for bringing her in without consulting you.”

Cecilia shook her head.

“She's an orphan you found on the battlefield, right? As an aristocrat, you did the right thing.”

Cecilia didn't seem to mind much.

Though she hadn't been told that Lily was a clone made by Cleo, Cecilia's nature was similar to Kurt's, and she trusted that Kurt had taken Lily in out of pity.

However, there was still a speck of doubt in her heart.

“Does Lord Kurt like girls like her?”

“That—isn't completely wrong, I guess?”

Kurt didn't want to hide his thoughts from Cecilia.

“But it's true that I wanted to help her. She's had an unusual upbringing, and she wouldn't be able to live long. I want her to be happy even if it's for

a little while.”

“Will Lord Kurt take her in as a concubine?”

“No, I think of her as a cute little sister.”

Cecilia stroked her chest in relief.

“I’m relieved to hear that.”

“Eh?”

“It’s embarrassing to admit, but I was feeling slightly jealous of Lily. Lord Kurt had personally brought her in, so I was worried I would be cast aside.”

Though they were entering a political marriage, she wanted to love him.

—No, she actually did love him.

Kurt felt guilty hearing this.

“That wasn’t my intention.”

(—Sorry, but I can’t betray Liam. If Liam orders it, I’ll have to fight your brother, meaning I’ll have to betray you someday.)

Seeing Lily running around happily, he felt angry toward Cleo for what he did.

(Let’s just take a step back and say it’s understandable that he betrayed Liam. After all, it’s politics. I’m not convinced by his reasons, but I’m willing to accept the result. However, there are lines that mustn’t be crossed, and His Highness Cleo crossed it without any hesitation.)

Creating a clone to beat Liam. Relying on artificial intelligence. Forcefully taking the property of an aristocrat.

Kurt had caught a glimpse of Cleo’s dark side.

(If His Highness Cleo becomes the Emperor, the Empire will surely fall to ruins.)

While he was worrying about the future, Lily fell down.

He rushed up to her and brought her back up.

“Hey, be careful.”

“Hehe, I fell.”

“Follow me.”

Kurt and Cecilia brought Lily to a nearby water source to remove the dirt on her.

It was like a fountain, but the water there decomposed the dirt as soon as it came into contact with it, and the moment Lily came out of the fountain, the water on her dried up.

Lily clapped her hands.

“This is amazing. I’m all clean now.”

Cecilia was slightly bewildered by Lily’s reaction.

“Is it that amazing? Things like this are everywhere, no?”

Seeing how confused she was, Kurt briefly explained Lily’s circumstances.

“Lily grew up in a special facility, so she doesn’t know about these everyday things.”

“Oh...I’m sorry. That was insensitive of me.”

When Cecilia apologized, Lily shook her head from side to side.

“It’s fine. Lily had Mr. Hat with her.”

“Mr. Hat?”

Cecilia cocked her head in confusion and turned her gaze to Kurt, but he shook his head as well, signaling her that he had no idea what Lily was talking about either.

“I think she’s talking about one of her caretakers, but Lily doesn’t seem to know much in detail.”

Lily desperately tried to explain who Mr. Hat was.

“Mr. Hat is very smart. He helped me when I was in trouble and healed me when I was hurting. Ehehe, Kurt’s given me a name, so I’ll have Mr. Hat call me by my name one day instead of my number.”

Kurt gently stroke Lily’s head.

“Yeah, I hope that happens one day.”

“I know it will! Mr. Hat was my only friend there. I wonder how I can meet him.”

“Hmm.”

Kurt thought hard with his arms crossed.

(The facility where Lily grew up is highly confidential, and it was probably destroyed already to eliminate evidence. Her so-called Mr. Hat might be gone as well. Even if he was alive, the chance of them meeting would be low.)

Hence he went a different route.

“Let’s pray that you meet him someday.”

“Pray?”

She knew what that meant, so she put her hands together.

Suddenly, she looked around left and right.

“What’s wrong, Lily?”

“Just now, right there! There was a puppy right there. She told me she’ll deliver my message!”

“A puppy?”

Kurt carefully observed their surrounding, but there was no dog in sight.

◇

Somewhere in the universe, the Guide in his hat-only form was shedding tears which became droplets that drifted about in space.

“I can’t even lay a curse on Liam anymore. In the past, it wouldn’t have bounced off of mere mithril.”

His powers had dropped significantly whereas Liam continued to grow stronger every day.

The gap between them was only growing bigger.

“I refuse to give up. I will never give up. As long as I crush Liam, I’ll be able to make a comeback and knock this world down to the pits of misery. If only you didn’t exist...”

A dog appeared behind the Guide with a knife in its mouth while the latter was muttering grudgingly.

It let go of the knife, which flew straight for the Guide.

The knife represented Lily’s gratitude, and it stabbed right into the Guide’s hat.

“GYAAAAAA!! This feeling of gratitude...is it Liam!? N-no, it’s not. This... No. 3588!? Why!? Why’s her gratitude reaching me!? N-no, stop! My body’s about to split! It’s gonna split!!”

Seeing the Guide desperately struggling to pull out the knife, the dog disappeared somewhere, content.

“No. 3588, after all the kindness I’ve shown you, how can you betray me like this!!”The cry of the Guide echoed throughout space.